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ALEXANDER  
WILSON

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POET - NATURALIST

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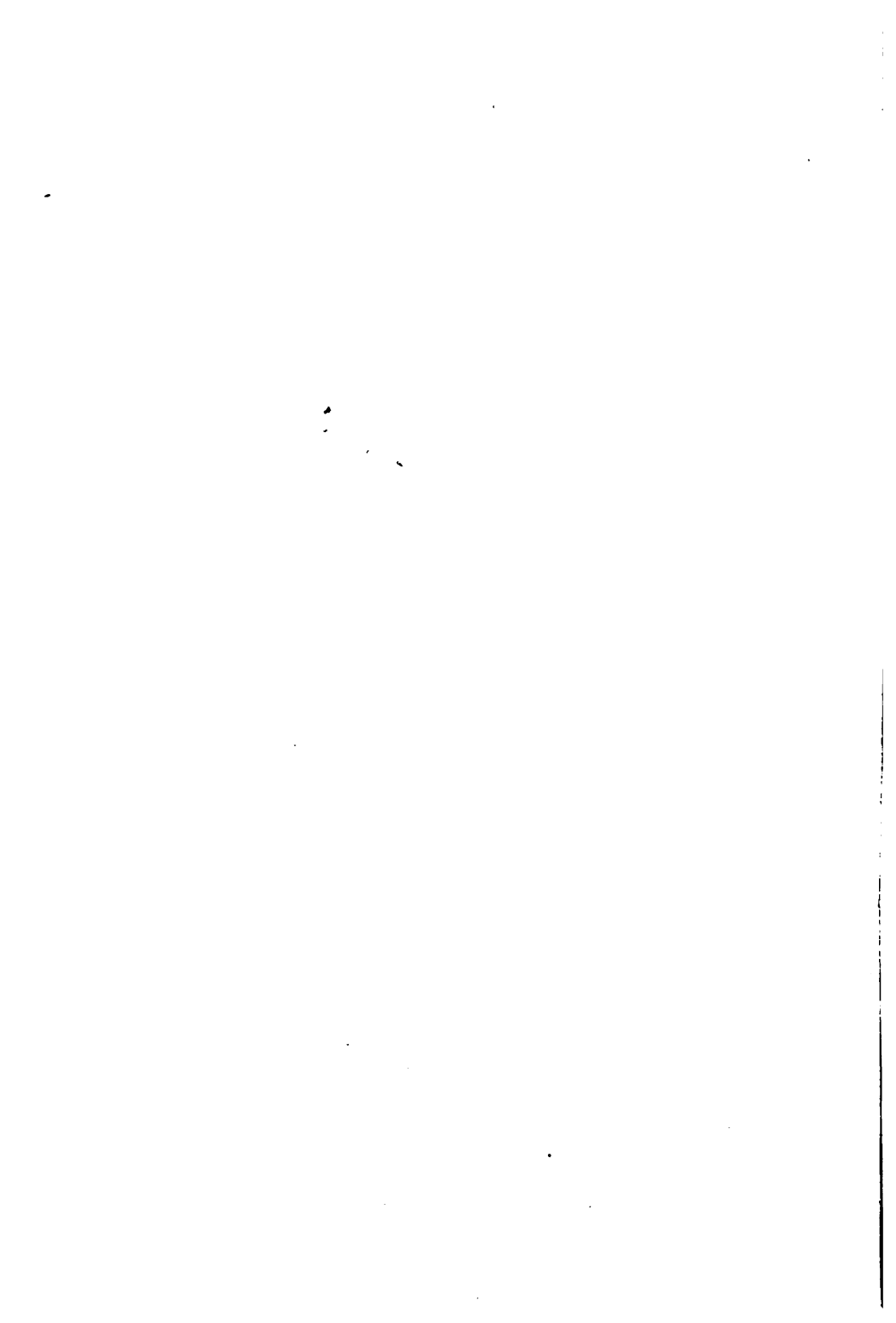
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TO VINU  
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*Samuel Johnson.*

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FRONTISPIECE

# JOSEPH WILSON

NATURALIST

OF HIS LIFE

SELECTED POEMS

JOSEPH WILSON, Ph. D.

*Professor of English and History  
at William and Mary*

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# ALEXANDER WILSON

POET-NATURALIST

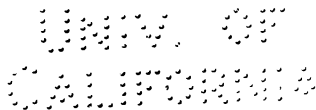
## A STUDY OF HIS LIFE WITH SELECTED POEMS

By JAMES SOUTHALL WILSON, Ph. D.

*Assistant Professor in the Department of English and History  
at the College of William and Mary*

"Wild Fancy formed him for fantastic flight,  
He loved the steep's high summit to explore,  
To watch the splendor of the orient bright,  
The dark deep forest, and the sea-beat shore."

"The Solitary Tutor."



New York and Washington  
THE NEALE PUBLISHING COMPANY

1906

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By JAMES SOUTHALL WILSON

TO VINU  
AMBORELLA

TO ONE WHOSE PRESENCE GAVE TO THE  
PAST, IMMORTALITY; THE MEMORY OF WHOM  
MAKES SWEET THE PRESENT, AND FROM  
WHOSE FAITH THE FUTURE HAS BORROWED  
ITS HOPE, THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED.

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## PREFACE

A pleasant task is finished ; a heavy burden has been laid aside. These are the conflicting feelings that one must needs experience who has completed the writing of a book. Though there have been no ties of consanguinity between the subject of this monograph and its writer, yet there has been much to make the work of real interest, and however tedious the labor has sometimes grown, the remembrance of the tireless energy and self-devotion of the spirit over whose life I was working has still nerved me for fresh endeavor.

The undertaking of this task was suggested to me by one whose ripe experience and discrimination was to me a sufficient guarantee that the work was worth the while, and if the limited public to which such a book as this can hope to appeal adds its approval to his I shall be satisfied and the labor shall have received its reward.

The few lives of Wilson which have preceded this have been scarcely more than brief sketches written as introductions to his works. Nor, with the exception of a desultory essay by Alexander B. Grosart, have they drawn attention to the pure literary work of the man. My acknowledgments are due to even the least of these biographies, for they have taught me, if nothing else, to keep myself clear from some of the faults into which they have fallen. To the excellent "Belfast Edition" of Wilson's poems and to the volumes edited by Grosart I am especially indebted for the complete text of his poems and for a convenient arrangement of his correspondence. Whenever it has been possible, however, I have made use of the original manuscripts or the first editions, which I was able to do largely through the kindness of the librarians

# TO WILSON A MONOGRAPH

10      ALEXANDER WILSON: POET-NATURALIST

of Princeton University, the Library of Congress and the Pennsylvania Historical Society, to whom I take this opportunity of expressing my obligations.

To those who shall take the trouble to read this biography, I feel that there is no need to make an excuse for its publication. The life of this self-educated Scotch weaver, who became the distinguished American scientist, justifies the telling by its interest, but the significance of the man's work gives to the record of the life its real importance. He was the first, as he is still among the greatest, of those who have thought the study of our American birds of enough importance to make it a life work, and as a man of letters he has a significance also. He stands with Freneau at the very fountain-head of that branch of American literature which still forms so important a part in our letters, the poetry of nature. Between Wilson and Philip Freneau, however, there is this difference—the son of Princeton represents the poets who give us impressions of nature while Wilson belongs to the number of those who simply paint nature as it is; the one is chiefly subjective, the other, objective.

What this monograph attempts is to give a fuller record of the man's life than has hitherto been written, and a real picture of the man himself; to show the conditions which made Wilson the kind of man that he was; to secure for him some consideration as a man of letters—historically considered; to clear forever the fair name of Thomas Jefferson from the charges of discourtesy and carelessness to science which the early biographers of Wilson brought, and by reprinting a few of the poems to give the reader an opportunity to secure a first-hand acquaintance with some of the better of Wilson's verses.

The study of conditions in Scotland during the eighteenth century will be, perhaps, as interesting to

the students of Burns, Fergusson, and Tannahill as to the admirers of our poet-naturalist. It is an investigation of a time of doubt and questioning, of a period whose symbol should be an interrogation mark. Each of those four poets struggled to solve the same questions and each attempted to do it in a different manner. Burns, the truest poet of them all, fell in the struggle, bruised and broken; Fergusson, a lesser, but a no less real, poet, found that his answer led to a mad-house; Tannahill chose the sickle of self-sought death with which to cut the Gordian-knot, but it was the feeblest poet of them all who proved the strongest man. Alexander Wilson found the freedom that he sought in a new land. Those early Scotch days, their problem and its answer, were vital factors in the man's life.

The letters between Wilson and Jefferson are here for the first time printed in full and I believe that they too will be of interest to many readers for other reasons than a mere interest in Wilson and his life. No admirer of Jefferson, at least, will regret the space which has been given to them.

In selecting the poems which are reprinted in this volume, care has been taken to consider first the merits of the verses and second their character as representing the nature of Wilson's poetical work. "The American Blue-bird," "The Osprey," "The Invitation," and "The Solitary Tutor" are examples of the best that their author accomplished in his mature years, after he had come to America. "Watty and Meg" represents both the best that he wrote on his native soil as well as his most successful use of the Scotch vernacular. Even the touch of coarseness which it contains, is characteristic of the early period of his life.

The texts of "The Invitation" and "The Solitary

"Tutor" are after the original copies as they appeared in Charles B. Brown's *Literary Magazine*. In the cases of the other poems the wording of later editions has been used.

So great is my obligation to the kindness and assistance of other people, that it is difficult to do more than express my thanks to all who have helped me, collectively. Especial acknowledgment is due, however, to Professor George M. Harper, of Princeton University, at whose suggestion this work was begun and whose advice throughout its writing has greatly influenced its present form.

I am also indebted for help and suggestions to Professor Paul van Dyke and Dr. Charles W. Kennedy, of Princeton University, to Mr. Worthington C. Ford, of Washington, D. C., and to the librarians of Princeton University, of the Norfolk, Virginia, Public Library, of the Pennsylvania Historical Society, and the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia.

I have reserved until the last an acknowledgment of courtesies which, perhaps, I appreciate the most. Many of the good people of Paisley, Scotland, have taken a great interest in this new life of their fellow-townsmen and have helped me in a very real way to secure information which it would otherwise have been impossible for me to obtain. To all such I extend my thanks, but especially to Messrs. John Kent and Charles M. Stevenson. It is fitting that they who would honor the memory of our Scotch-American poet and ornithologist should in sympathy "stretch hands across the sea."

*Williamsburg, Virginia,*  
*October 1, 1906.*

J. S. W.

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1766, July 6—Birth, Paisley, Scotland.  
1776—Wilson's mother died.  
177—Alexander Wilson, Sr., marries again.  
1779—Wilson bound as apprentice to William Duncan.  
1779-1782—Learns weaving.  
1782—Apprenticeship expires.  
1782-'89—Weaving and peddling. Contributes to *Glasgow Advertiser*.  
1789—Attempts to publish poems.  
1790—"Poems, Humorous, Satirical and Serious," Neilson, publisher.  
1791—"Laurel Disputed." "Watty and Meg." "Poems," second edition.  
1791-'93—Weaver and traveler.  
1793-'94—Troubles with Mr. Sharp, a manufacturer of Paisley.  
1794—Sails for America in the *Swift* from Belfast.  
1794, July 14—Lands at Newcastle. Works with John Aiken, printer, Philadelphia.  
1794-'95—Weaving at Pennypack Creek, Penn., and Sheppardstown, Va. Peddling in New Jersey. School-teaching at Frankfort, Penn.  
1795-1801—Teacher at Milestown, Penn. Surveying. Walks to Ovid, Cayuga County, N. Y.  
1801-'02—Teaches at Bloomfield, N. J.  
1802—Accepts teaching position at Union School, Gray's Ferry, near Philadelphia.

- 1803—Studies drawing, etc. Plans his "Ornithology."
- 1804—First ornithological journey, to Niagara Falls. Publishes "The Invitation," "The Rural Walk," and "The Solitary Tutor" in *The Literary Magazine*, Philadelphia.
- 1805—Writes short poems and studies birds.
- 1806—Applies to Jefferson for appointment on Pike's Expedition. Resigns position at Gray's Ferry School. Becomes assistant editor on Ree's Cyclopedia, published by S. F. Bradford, Philadelphia.
- 1807—~~Begins traveling through Pennsylvania.~~
- 1808—First volume of the "American Ornithology" published by Bradford and Inskip (first two plates engraved by Wilson's own hands).  
           Begins traveling North to solicit subscriptions.  
           Meets Thomas Payne at Greenwich.
- 1808-'09—Travels through the South near the sea coast.
- 1809-'10—Journey through the interior by way of Pittsburgh to Florida.
- 1810—Second volume, "American Ornithology."
- 1811—Third and fourth volumes, "American Ornithology."
- 1812—Fifth and sixth volumes, "American Ornithology." Last ornithological trip, as far North as Maine. Elected member American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia and of the Society of Artists of the United States.

- 1813—Seventh volume, "American Ornithology."  
1813, Aug. 13 (?)—Taken sick with dysentery after taking cold from exposure. August 23, Alexander Wilson died in Philadelphia. Buried in the yard of the Swedes' Church, Water Street, Philadelphia.  
1814—Eighth volume, "American Ornithology."  
1814, May—Ninth volume, "American Ornithology," with a life of Wilson by George Ord.  
1816—Alexander Wilson's father died in Scotland.





# ALEXANDER WILSON

## POET-NATURALIST

### CHAPTER I

#### SCOTLAND IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

When James Boswell, in defending Scotland to Dr. Samuel Johnson, spoke of the country's splendid prospects, the Doctor brought his heavy fist down on the table with a thud which shook the room and thundered out, "Sir, let me tell you, the noblest prospect which a Scotchman ever sees is the high-road that leads him to England." In very truth it must be said that there was not much in the appearances of things to give the lie to Dr. Johnson. The Scotland of the early part of the eighteenth century was a bare, dreary country. Its farm lands were unenclosed and almost without growth, save where flowered the heath and whin; its towns were dirty and sewerless; even from the streets of such cities as Glasgow and Edinburgh went up the stench of decayed refuse which had been thrown from the windows above; the churches were very frequently disorganized and factious, the schools poor, and the morals of the people loose and corrupt.

Especially among the lower classes in Scotland, morality was in a deplorable state. The cold, strict religion became so formal and forbidding as to be a harmful rather than a helping influence, and was regarded by the younger people as a thing to be

avoided when possible and endured when necessary. A church service could not be missed without the apprehension of seeing the peeking faces of the elders, and perhaps the minister also, at one's window, and the fear of enduring the penalties of such discovery. It was not strange under these conditions that religion with many persons was a synonym for much that was disagreeable. The rigid parental regulations which were in vogue allowed little visiting and few gaities among the youths, and then, as will always happen when youthful spirits are denied their innocent channels of amusement, they found some forbidden ways of outlet which were not always so innocent. "Whistle an' I'll come to you, my lad," became the accepted order of the day. Such clandestine meetings, combined with the Scotch law that an open avowal of marriage is all that is necessary to make the bonds legal, naturally resulted in a loose morality, and the troubles of poor Bobbie Burns were indicative of the conditions that frequently obtained. One has only to read the letters and journals of the day to become convinced of the vast extent of this immorality both in the cities and in the country.

"The English," said a Scotch lady to Capt. Edward Birt, "often take liberties after they are married and seldom before; whereas the Scots women, when they make a trip, it is while they are single, and very rarely afterwards."\* It was customary in most parts of Scotland to require persons guilty of immoral conduct to do penance by standing in

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\* "Letters from a Gentleman in North of Scotland," by Captain Edward Birt, 1759, I, p. 123.

sackcloth at the church door on Sundays, rather than enforce the rigid Scotch laws. This disgrace was often mitigated or even avoided by the payment of money to the church treasurer.\* Sometimes several of a young man's friends would stand around him, and since the public might not know which was the guilty one in the group the penance was thus turned into a frolic. Birt informs us also that, "When a woman has undergone the penance, with an appearance of repentance she has wiped off the scandal among all the Godly."† In the midst of these conditions Alexander Wilson grew up, and in contending against them in part, and sometimes in yielding to them, too, his character was formed. It is this remarkable character of his that is the explanation both of his achievements in science and of his literary work. For this reason a very careful study of the era in which he lived and the people who surrounded him, and of whom he was one, is necessary before we consider the man himself and what he accomplished. The loose customs of the day, its immorality and intemperance, played a great part in the lives of Robert Fergusson and Burns, and the young poet of Paisley, Robert Tannahill, also, and though the habits of immorality were more to be noticed in Wilson "in the breach than the observance," yet their influence upon him helped to make him the man that he was. Captain Topham was scandalized by the custom which existed of indiscriminate kissing between young women

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\* "Letters from a Gentleman in North of Scotland," by Captain Edward Birt, 1759, I, p. 234.

† Ibid., p. 123.

and men\* and Lady Elliott of Minto declared that, "The misses are the most rotten part of the society."† Nor was it in the least uncommon for the best-bred ladies to accompany young men to the dirty little oyster cellars below the street, where they ate and drank together.‡

It was among the poorer classes that conditions were worst. Especially appalling are the figures which illustrate the number of child-murders which occurred all through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. So great was the dread of the church penance that the worst crimes were committed to avoid it, and in some parishes it became necessary to cease enforcing these penances in order that the murder of babies might be lessened.§ This crime was at its most terrible climax in the latter half of the seventeenth century. On one day, in Edinburgh alone, in the year 1681, seven women were executed for destroying their offspring; four were hanged in Aberdeen in 1705 in a single day and in 1714 there were executions on the 18th and 24th of June and the 3rd of July.|| In 1690 a law was passed, which remained effective in the following century, making a woman responsible for the death of her child even though there were no signs of violence, unless some one was with her at the time of its death.¶ Yet the crime continued so frequent that

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\* Topham's Letters.

† Graham's *Social Life in Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*, II, p. 108.

‡ Ibid., II, p. 108.

§ "Travels of Rev. James Hall," II, p. 351.

|| Graham's *"Social Life in Scotland in the Eighteenth Century,"* II, p. 223.

¶ Ibid., II, p. 223.

the General Assembly found it needful to require the ministers to read from the pulpit the law against child-murder.\* So widespread was the crime in the earlier part of the eighteenth century that the Reverend James Hall declared it to be generally reputed that the "Scottish women are the greatest infanticides in the world."†

It is a significant fact that the severity of the punishment for immorality was less for the lower orders than for the more enlightened classes. An amusing story is related of a certain John Pardie who took appeal in a case in which he was fined as a gentleman £100 Scots for being guilty of immorality. The lords in session tried the appeal and sustained his objection, reducing the fine to £16 Scots. They gave as their very good reason that "he had not the air or face of a gentleman."‡ So prevalent was immorality among the poorer classes that its opposite seems to have been scarcely expected; and Captain Birt says that when a maid strayed from the path of rectitude she was received back in the family by which she was employed just as though she had shown no signs of frailty. Under such conditions it is no cause for surprise that immorality steadily increased until near the end of the century.

In 1763 the fines collected by the kirk-treasurers for illegitimate children in Edinburgh amounted to £154; for the ten succeeding years they averaged about £190, while by 1783 the amazing figures show

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\* Ibid., and "Travels of Rev. James Hall," II.

† "Travels of Rev. James Hall," II, p. 351.

‡ Graham's "Social Life in Scotland in the Eighteenth Century," II, p. 219.

an increase of £600.\* William Creech, writing of the period about 1783, declared that "every quarter of the city and suburbs was infested with multitudes of females abandoned to vice, and a great many at a very early period of life, before passion could mislead or reason teach them right from wrong."†

It is a dark picture that I have drawn of Scotland's moral condition, but I believe none too dark, and it illustrates better than anything else can do the obstacles which such men as Burns and Fergusson, Wilson and Tannahill had to contend against. For the effects of the conditions permeated everything and everywhere, even to the tone and subjects of the conversation of the day. They were times when men called "a spade a spade," and without the least sense of impropriety they introduced the coarse and revolting into their conversations and writings. The old "chap-books" and the poems of the day show that this fondness for the vulgar continued to the very end of the century; being illustrated even in many of the verses, written before he left Scotland, by the young Alexander Wilson.

There was another feature of Scotch life in that day that should not be overlooked, the extent of drunkenness. This, as we are to see, was the last of the old national vices to be rolled away before the waves of progress and enlightenment which were beginning to sweep over Scotland toward the close of the century. That it was so universal is the less

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\* Letters to Sir John Sinclair in "Edinburgh Fugitive Pieces," by William Creech, reprinted 1785.

† Ibid.

surprising when we learn how it was not only winl ed at, but even encouraged, by the political authorities. Among the "Culloden Papers," published in 1815, there is a most remarkable letter written by Duncan Forbes, Lord President of the Court of Sessions of Scotland, on the state of the revenue of the country. Its date is perhaps about 1742 and was addressed to the Marquis of Tweeddale. Forbes bewails the fact that the excise on beer, ale, and spirits has fallen since 1733 from £40,000 to about one-half of this amount. He gives as the reason the increased consumption of tea and declares that the promiscuous custom of drinking it must be stopped. He recounts how the habit began with more prominent households, gradually spreading until "the use of ale and beer for mornings and afternoons was almost wholly laid aside; and the Revenue of Excise has sunk in proportion as this villainous practice has grown."\* As a means of compelling people to return to stronger drink he advises one of two methods: either the forbidding of tea-drinking by law or else that the tax on it be increased to prohibitive figures.

In 1708 there were known to have been 50,800 gallons of whiskey produced in Scotland, but fifty years later the number had increased to 433,800 on which duty was paid.† When it is remembered that Lord Forbes, the writer of the above quoted letter, was the owner of the Ferintosh stills, the largest in Scotland, and as these stills paid no excise, we can form some idea of how much the real production ex-

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\* Culloden Papers, 1815, p. 191 et seq.

† Graham's "Social Life in Scotland in the Eighteenth Century," II, p. 263.



ceeded the above figures. Illicit stills, too, existed in every glen, and "the illicit distillery of whiskey was never considered a crime, so long as smugglers kept clear of the officers of the law. It was rather regarded as one of the legitimate industries of the country."\* This increase in the production of whiskey was also created directly by the law-makers.

In 1725 an impost of 6d. began to be enforced on every bushel of malt, and though it was later reduced one half, the popularity of the old drink, "two-penny" ale, steadily decreased and that of whiskey became greater. How the conditions became yet worse as the century grew older will be presently shown. We turn now to other conditions which indicate the state of Scotland at the middle of the century.

Profanity kept progress with the spread of drunkenness. It became common even among ladies. When some one spoke of the "pretender," the old Lady Strange could not restrain herself; "Pretender, forsooth!" she cried, her eyes blazing scorn at the defamer of her idol, "Pretender, forsooth! and be dawm'd to ye!"† Numbers of such stories might be quoted. There is another of an old lady of distinguished family who when the customs changed in her latter years was unable to accommodate herself to them. The way she compromised is illustrated by her speech to her coachman when he gave as his excuse for stopping the horses, that he had seen a falling star. "And what hae ye

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\* "The History of Shropshire," by Wm. Nimmo.

† Dennistown's "Life of Sir Robert Strange," II, p. 213.

to do wi' the stars, I wad like to ken?" she scolded. "Drive on this moment, and be dawmed to ye," adding in a lower tone, according to her wont, "as Sir John wad ha' said if he had been alive, honest man."\*

Among the poorer people there were worse things yet to be seen and heard. The unquestioning trust in the doctrine that everything would be as it must be in spite of anything that might be done led the people to neglect sanitary conditions entirely. Several families were frequently crowded into the same house and the most odious diseases ran riot unchecked. "One hundred and fifty families," Birt declared, "may live on ground paying £80 a year."† The resulting horror of the conditions of these poor people is illustrated by the record of twenty-one persons having been prosecuted for uncleanness by the Sheriff of Paisley in the year 1715.‡ In the coal pits and mines even more pitiable circumstances were to be found, and an actual system of white slavery of the most horrible sort existed there until 1799. An act of 1775 emancipated all who after that date might "begin to work as colliers and salt-ers,"§ but the rest were not freed until the close of the century.

In the very punishments administered the age made evident its brutality and want of culture. It was common to strike off a man's hands before hanging him,|| and the borough records of Lanark

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\* Stirling Maxwell's *Miscellaneous Essays*, p. 160.

† Birt's *Letters*, II, p. 343.

‡ Hector's *Judicial Records of Renfrewshire*, p. 80.

§ Cockburn's *Memorials*, p. 76.

|| Graham's *"Social Life,"* II, p. 225.

preserve the notices of shoe-thieves who were banished the town on pain of "being whipped, burned, and again banished" if they returned.\* One of the penalties exacted of an immoral woman was to stand by the market cross with shaven head while the hangman stood by her.

As late as 1775 petty robberies were punished at Glasgow by escorting the culprit with "tuck of drums and head bare" to the limits of the city and banishing him on pain of imprisonment and whipping if he ever returned to the city.† On the borough records of Stirling is the following very suggestive entry: "March, 1722. For tow for binding Catherine M'Cullock to the tron 2s. Scots. For a penknife for cutting off her ear 3s. Scots."

Not until 1793‡ was the custom of flogging publicly in the streets abolished, and there is good reason to believe that in many of the smaller towns it continued to a much later date.

When we have examined thus carefully into these conditions of society in a country that was afterward to become so famed for its enlightenment and learning, it is worth our while to consider the educational institutions of this period. Though even then in Scotland education was, perhaps, more widely disseminated than in most other countries at the same era, yet it was for the greater part of a very rudimentary nature.

Though Scotch universities, indeed, offered remarkable advantages to the poor but ambitious boy,

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\* Burgh Records of Lanark.

† Graham's "Social Life," II, p. 227.

‡ "Glasgow, Past and Present," I, 339.

yet the average youth at an early age quitted his grammar-school by force of necessity for the plow or the loom. Nevertheless, it was due to these grammar-schools that the widespread ignorance which was common among the poorer classes of almost every other nation was not to be noted in Scotland. As has been strongly expressed by an eminent Scotchman\* of our own day there is no peasantry in Scotland, and the all-pervading influence of the grammar-schools is in great part the reason for this fact.

The schools of the eighteenth century, it must be remarked, were very different from what they are to-day. Remarkable indeed for existing in such numbers at all, they were still only good as compared with the schools of other countries at the same period, and not as compared with modern institutions, and moreover they undoubtedly differed greatly among themselves. Then, too, when we remember the intermittent manner in which many of the pupils attended, we can realize how limited after all were the educational advantages even in Scotland, of the sons of the class which in other countries would have formed the peasantry. All this must be held in memory lest we underestimate the difficulties which had to be overcome by the less well-to-do Scotchmen of this era, so many of whom did gain an excellent education in spite of every hindrance.

The condition of Scotland in material matters was worse than its moral state, and far in arrears of its educational attainments. Since there were no en-

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\* Dr. Hugh Black.

closures, "herds" had to watch the flocks in order that one man's property should not be injured by another's or else hopelessly confused with it. The unsightly and uncomfortable houses were rarely shaded by trees or beautified by gardens, and in the whole of Renfrewshire there had been no forest since ancient days. Even the streets of Paisley, and the country roads around it, were but scantily shaded by a few lone trees.

The agricultural methods were primitive, the crops few and unprofitable. Up to nearly the middle of the century the small supply of turnips that were raised were regarded as a great delicacy and served at meals as a dessert. Even after radical changes began to be well under way, and the revolution of things, which later transformed all Scotland, was being led by a few cultured and enterprising gentlemen, the ignorant and prejudiced country people bitterly resented every innovation, and under the shadow of night would demolish the new enclosures, and pull up the young trees and hedges that had been planted, for fear, as they ingenuously declared, they might harbor birds that would destroy their crops.

With affairs in such a condition as this it required glasses of a very rosy hue indeed to make even a Scotchman, if he were familiar with the more cultured society of England, see things in a very hopeful light. No wonder then that almost all Englishmen thought with Dr. Johnson that the high-road to London was Scotland's best prospect. Even then, however, there were silent forces moving beneath the surface of things that were making for a new

Scotland; already they were working the doom of the provincial prejudice and superstition which had sucked, like vampires, the blood of progress from the nation.

The real beginning of Scotland's transformation may be dated from the Act of Union with England in 1707, for that in a very true sense meant the opening up of the "noblest prospect," the high-road to England. Hitherto the restrictions which England had put upon Scotland's trade had been greatly hampering, but now commerce with foreign nations might be carried on with comparative freedom, while still freer were the possibilities for traffic with England itself. Nevertheless, the beneficial effects of the Union were slow in developing and up to the middle of the century were not noticeable. The immediate result of the Act, indeed, seemed only a fostering of bitter opposition to everything English in a great many quarters, and to oppose British innovations was for a while a noble form of patriotism. On the other hand not a few Scotchmen were ready with open minds to see the ultimate advantages which Scotland would reap from the Act of Union. The natural outcome of the opposition between these parties was seen in the bitter animosities that for a while were rife, and, at times, in armed resistance to British rule. Gradually, however, the hostile factions became less bitter, and the strife was practically ended in 1745 with the last rebellion against English law.

The Turnpike Road Act, passed in 1751, gave an impetus to the advancement of affairs in Scotland, and a true industrial revolution may be said to date

from the closing year of the Seven Years' War in Europe, 1763, for with peace came the opportunity for the ripening of the real fruits of the Act of Union. The introduction of plows from the South, and the publication of Kames' *Gentleman Farmer*, 1777,\* began a new era in agriculture. A writer† in 1782 says, "The land which used then to let in tack, at five, six or seven shillings *per acre*, will set or let in tack, at twenty shillings *per acre* at present. About that period, viz, 1755, there was scarce a farm, I knew, that had any enclosures about them, except about their gardens, or what gentlemen kept within their own possessions. \* \* \* But from the year 1763 to the year 1773, the noblemen and gentlemen raised a spirit of improvement upon their estates, and at the expiration of their tenants' tacks they raised their rents, some double, others near triple of the preceding rents, and bound their tenants to enclose the whole of their farms with hedges and ditches, or stone dykes, as was most convenient for them; and to plow their grounds so many years, generally two, and then let lie in pasture four years; by which means the ground is always kept in strength." "Since the year 1700," the same writer says, "Scotland has made more improvement in agriculture, mechanics, literature, than in any three centuries before."

The wonderful growth in shipbuilding, in the fisheries, in manufactories, and in commerce may all be traced most convincingly, certainly in part at

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\* Mention should also be made of Donaldson's "Husbandry Anatomized," 1697.

† "The History of the Shire of Renfrew" by George Crawford and William Semple, p. 9. Paisley: Alex Weir, 1782.

least, to the Act of Union.\* The Act threw the two nations into closer contact, and the great industrial revolution which was going on in England was thus enabled to act in no small degree upon Scottish affairs. The movement once started, conditions changed with the most remarkable rapidity. Even the landscape took on a new appearance, due to the liberal planting of trees and building of hedges, and in place of the vast barren stretches, unbroken save by masses of purple heather and yellow whin, there were now great fields of verdant crops.

Paisley has been the birth-place of not a few men of note. Good old Christopher North and his less distinguished brother, James Wilson,—a rare, sweet nature, by the way, and no bad writer,—were both born there, and the poet Robert Tannahill was but a few years their junior, while quite a school of very minor writers, now forgotten, flourished there about this same period. At the close of the previous century, not only did the town lack nearly all the virtues that were later to give it the name of "the Paradise of Scotland," but it was also deep in the darkest superstitions of the day. Even as late as the reign of their most enlightened Christian majesties, William and Mary, in 1697, when the ministers of Paisley Presbytery were directed to settle certain religious matters, they were too busy at trying the Renfrewshire witches to do so, "preferring to contend with the devil in Paisley rather than with the schismatics of Forfar."† Even in 1770 misdemeanors were still punished with revolting cruelty. Hec-

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\* See Mackinnon's "The Union of England and Scotland."

† Lee's "Paisley Abbey," p. 193.



tor's Judicial Records\* tell us of a case, at which Alexander Wilson might, perhaps, have stared from some window with the wondering baby-eyes of a child of four, when a woman, who was being carried to jail for stealing lawn from a bleaching field, was stripped to the waist and flogged with a lash by a locks-man through the streets of Paisley.

The secret of Paisley's transformation from a rude little town to an important city is found in the growth of its manufacturing industries, and a great deal of this progress was due to the energetic spirit of the women.† Just as it was the Duchess of Gordon who helped to revolutionize the agriculture of Scotland by introducing new implements of tillage, so now it was Mrs. Christian Shaw Miller who began the improvement of the manufacturing industries of Paisley. With the other ladies of the house of Bagarran she introduced in 1725, under the family coat of arms, the Dutch process of making thread. Later Mrs. Henry Fletcher of Salton went into Holland, disguised as a man, with two mechanics, learned the linen process, and introduced this also into Scotland. From so small a beginning the Scotch industries grew apace and soon Paisley was as full of the noise of plying looms as any town of Holland.

Meanwhile the intellectual advancement of Paisley, and indeed of all Scotland, was keeping pace with the material development. As the century wore on, the condition of education improved with tre-

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\* Hector's "Judicial Records of Renfrewshire," p. 254.

† See "Social Life in Scotland in the Eighteenth Century," by Henry Gray Graham, II, pp. 250-251. "The Union of England and Scotland," by James Mackinnon; and "Social England," Vol. IV, by H. D. Traill.

mendous strides, until from being merely somewhat in advance of other countries by reason of the number of schools, the educational advantages of Scotland became the just subject of the boasting of every patriotic Scotchman. When Dorothy Wordsworth traveled through Scotland with her brother in 1803, she remarked with wonder that even among the highland wilds the children were fairly well taught. The excellent results of this teaching is bountifully witnessed by the lives of the scholars who were trained under it and afterward came to America. Scotland's debt to her schools, poor as some of them no doubt were, can scarcely be overestimated, and to them without question was due in large part the greatness of the strides which the country was making in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

The prosperity of Scotland as a nation at this later period is astonishingly illustrated by comparative figures. The imports in 1775 were only £465,411 as compared with £1,981,630 in 1791. The respective figures for the exports of the same years are £535,576 and £1,269,520. Both exports and imports continued to grow at an amazing rate every year with the exception of 1795, the year after Wilson left Scotland, when the former fell to more than £700,000 less than they had been for four years previous and the latter showed a decrease of nearly £300,000.\* This was perhaps due to the hard times which were partly instrumental in driving Wilson to America. Wages increased and "the ma-

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\* Chambers's Gazetteer of Scotland, 1844.

son, the weaver, the carpenter, who could in 1750 only earn his 6d. a day, in 1790 made his 1s. or 1s. 2d."\* Expenses, however, had increased even more rapidly, so that even then the poor Scotchman was confronted still by hard and exacting conditions.

In literature Scotland was now producing men that the world had to reckon with. Not a few had accepted the high-road to England as their "noblest prospect" and merely gave to their country the brightness of their names. Of such men were Thomson and Smollett. James Thomson set out for England in 1725 with his poem on "Winter" in his pocket, and eleven years later Smollett came to London by packhorse with a bag containing a set of surgeon's lancets and "The Regicide." Many other men of sterling worth, like President Witherspoon of the College of New Jersey, and later Alexander Wilson, left their native land for America; but nevertheless quite a number of literary men remained in Scotland. The school of philosophy, which found strong representatives in David Hume, James Beattie, Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart and such men, was especially remarkable as indicating the intellectual awakening of the country, and artists like the second Allen Ramsay were winning renown at home and abroad.

In the earlier part of the century literature had found its most representative types in the authors of the old chap-books, men of great local reputation. Patrick Walker, a sedate Covenanter peddler, was the disseminator of what little news or literature there was to find its way over the roads familiar to

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\* Graham's "Social Life," II, p. 261.

his little white pony. Dugald Graham, a dwarfish hunch-back, strolled the country in a fantastic long scarlet cloak, blue breeches and cocked hat. Vulgar and coarse, he too was known everywhere, and his poems, such as "Lothian Tom" and "Jockey and Maggie's Courtship," won for him the title of the "Boccaccio of the byre."

Under the changed conditions of society quite another sort of literary man was to be produced, but he was to find a bitter conflict awaiting him with some of the customs of life and traits of character which his ancestors had passed on to him. The blight which of all other things was to most nearly blast the opening bud of Scottish genius was intemperance. While other social evils were being corrected this one grew yet stronger.

Scottish life had been held in check for many years by one of the strictest of all religions. Church-going had been compulsory, sermons and prayers long and tiresome, and even men's every-day affairs were the objects of ecclesiastical surveillance. Petrie\* objected to coffee-houses because grace was not said over each cup, and the minister of Dunrossness ascribes the death of a man to divine wrath because he laughed when he was rebuked for taking his "dram" without a blessing.† Even at an ale-house a long blessing must be said over each drink. It was but natural that, in the vigorous era that now came in, a violent reaction should take place. The struggle for independence in America, where so many Scotchmen had kindred, and the political

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\* "Rules of Good Deportment," by Adam Petrie, 1720.

† Mill's Diary, p. 84.

movements of the French, began to affect the minds of the educated young Scotchmen. A seething unrest stirred among them. It began earlier, but it was in the nineties before it assumed such activity that the elder conservatives became alarmed. In 1792 the borough records of Peebles record, "Wild ideas about liberty and equality, projected by the French Revolution, having reached Peebles, and affected some young men, the council declare their horror of the seditious writings and open efforts of the turbulent and designing for the subversion of our present, and in favor of republican government."\* Even the General Assembly took fright and passed ordinances against certain Sunday-schools where "ignorant persons, notoriously disaffected to the civil constitution of the country," have an opportunity to corrupt the youth.† Social clubs, which had been harmless enough at first, now became centers of a propaganda for free thinking and free drinking. The life of many of the brightest young men in Scotland became a mad whirl of drunkenness and debauch. From 1707 to 1808 the population had increased only about 500,000, but the increase in the excise revenue was over £1,760,000‡ In Edinburgh alone in 1790, with a population of 80,000, there were 2,011 licensed and unlicensed bars, most of which catered to the trade of the lower classes.§ And in the same city in 1778 there were eight licensed and four hun-

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\* Wm. Chalmers's "History of Peebleshire," 1864.

† Graham's "Social Life," II, p. 271.

‡ Chalmers's "Domestic Economy of Great Britain and Ireland," 1812, p. 387.

§ Arnot's "History of Edinburgh," p. 335.

dred illicit stills busy making whiskey to supply the ever-increasing demands. Though "there were drunken brawls in plenty, with fatal results; immorality, which was rife, especially among the peasantry," yet there were comparatively few "of the greater and more dangerous offences," says Graham.\* One reason for this was that much of the drinking was done in the coffee-houses and clubs, where men of all sorts congregated together and in some ways exerted a restraining influence upon one another. With hilarity and tumult they pledged each other, drank to the ladies, and emptied their glasses to such sentiments as "May the wind of adversity ne'er blaw open our door," "To freedom all the world over," or in good old Scotch, "May waur ne'er be amang us." Thus the clubs took on a different nature from those of the day when the poet, Allen Ramsay, joined and enjoyed his "Easy Club" and kept his health and reputation. The later "Hell-fire Club" had many of the characteristics which its name implied. The "Bachelors' Club" to which young Burns belonged, and the meetings which Wilson celebrated in poems like "The Group" and "Hogmenae" were of the less harmful class, but even Burns's hardy constitution went down before the late hours and hard drinking of the "Crochallan Club." Poor Robert Fergusson, ruined by dissipation, ended his days before he was twenty-five, on the straw of a mad-house. It was a life full of pitfalls that these poets led. Republican, socialistic and atheistic ideas were hopelessly confused around the

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\* "Social Life," II, p. 234.

table in the tavern of the suave old host, John Dowie, from which the revellers sometimes withdrew to find relaxation in the music of Handel or Corelli at St. Cecelia's Music Hall in Edinburgh. Their tempestuous lives often came to tragic ends. Robert Tannahill, the gifted young poet of Paisley, escaped a fate like that of Fergusson by taking his own life, and perhaps even Wilson was saved by his timely emigration.

The day was one of fierce agitation along all lines, but it justified itself by producing such men as Adam Smith and Robert Burns; and England—the England which had shared in Dr. Johnson's opinion of Scotch affairs—learned at last that many good things could come out of Scotland.

In such a period of social, industrial, political, religious and philosophical revolution as this, Alexander Wilson was born and lived his early life. In him we have a representative of the time and nation in which his being and character took form. Could we indeed "pluck out the stops" and learn and understand this man we should know much of the potentiality of the Scotland of the eighteenth century. Nor is it possible that we can understand the sources of the strength of his later nature until we have learned something of the difficulties which he overcame, the temptations which he resisted, in those early years in Scotland.

## CHAPTER II

### WILSON'S EARLY YEARS IN SCOTLAND

Alexander Wilson was born on the 6th of July, 1766. His birth-town, Paisley, in the shire of Renfrew, Scotland, is about seven miles to the west of Glasgow. With the noise of its many looms and the rush of its bustling trade there is little about Paisley that is poetic; even the White Cart, of which Burns sang as "rinning, rowin' to the sea," is no longer white; soiled and defiled by the grimy hand of commerce, it flows in a dark and turbid stream. A century and a half ago it was perhaps very little more poetic than it is to-day. Already the looms were plying; already the spirit of commercialism had taken Paisley in its grasp. Nor was the lack of what is physically romantic made up for by beautiful old traditions or quaint stories of the past, with which so many parts of Scotland teem. The royal name of Stuart, it is true, was anciently linked with the annals of Paisley, and an air of romance and mystery still clung about the picturesque walls of the antique abbey, but, to a poet's eye, Paisley of the eighteenth century must have been, comparatively speaking, as matter of fact and as briskly businesslike as it is to-day.

That part of Paisley in which Wilson was born, known as the Seedhills, was, save for the white gulls that sported above the Cart, equally unromantic; as late as 1782 it is recorded as consisting of only forty-five houses, in which there were eighty



families and sixty-six looms; not an unusual condition of affairs when compared with other parts of the town.

The Wilsons were originally a Lochwinnoch family and were devoted Covenanters, but in the time of Alexander's great-grandfather they were driven by the persecutions of the day from Renfrewshire and found a refuge in Campbeltown in the southern part of Argyleshire.

Alexander Wilson, Sr., the father of the ornithologist, seems to have returned early in his life to his family's native shire, where he settled in Paisley and took up the occupation of weaving. He was born in 1728, and was a man of hardy, robust type, stern and taciturn perhaps, but a true Scot. In addition to his legitimate trade of weaving, the elder Wilson undoubtedly carried on a distillery of his own, which did not come within the sanction of the law. This distillery, we are told, was situated in his garden, and in order to work it successfully, more or less smuggling had to be carried on.

The biographers of the distinguished son have been wont to slur over, or attempt to throw doubts upon, this fact in the life of the father, or else to hold up their hands in pious surprise, for otherwise he led a worthy and most godly life. But a little study of this interesting period in Scotland will quite do away with the necessity of any confusion on this point or with any appearance of hypocrisy on Wilson's part. The old man himself would have been the last to blush from any sense of wrongdoing. Smuggling and the illicit distilling of whiskey were at this time considered very honorable

occupations in Scotland. There had grown up hearty hatred for the laws, which followed the Act of Union, on these matters, and with the proverbial Scottish independence they showed their contempt for them by systematically breaking them. It was almost a patriotic duty. Says a close student of Scotch conditions in the eighteenth century, "Gentlemen holding high position in the county and offices of justices of the peace joined the smugglers in their ventures of running in the cargoes, while excisemen were hopelessly baffled."\* Even the clergy covertly winked at this traffic and not infrequently openly approved of it. "Illicit distillers were as much respected as smugglers and equally unconscious of any heinousness."† So Wilson lost none of his fellow-townsmen's respect but he was held as one of the worthiest and wealthiest of his class, when he became sufficiently thrifty to possess several looms and employ journeymen. Among his associates Wilson, Sr., was regarded as "a man of sober and industrious habits, of strict honesty and superior intelligence," and from America his son, after he had become a mature man, wrote as counsel for his brother David that he should "take his father's advice in every difficulty. If he does I can tell him he will never repent it."

Alexander Wilson, Sr., married first Mary McNab, whose family moved during her own girlhood from the "Row" in Dumbarton to Paisley. All the little that we know of her is to her credit, and she would seem to belong to that long list of noble

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\* "Social Life in Scotland in the Eighteenth Century," II, pp. 261-2.

† Ibid.

mothers who planted the first seeds of greatness in the characters of their sons. She was a good-looking, intelligent woman, and was truly Scotch in the depth and fervor of her religion. For her son she had but one dream,—that dream which is shattered for many a fond mother,—that he should become as religious as herself, and—to quote his own words—

"She talked with tears of that enrapturing sight,  
When clad in sable gown, with solemn air,  
The walls of God's own house should echo back his prayer."\*

When Alexander was but a lad of ten the frail frame of his mother gave way and he was left but a dim memory of her to carry with him through his after years. Though young Alexander had been the fifth of six children, yet they had all died in their infancy except two sisters and himself. At the mother's death the three children were all young and it was not long before the father married again, this time a widow, Catherine Urie, *nee* Brown, who, like himself, had a family of "young hopefuls." That the second wife was a woman of pleasant character we may infer from the kind manner in which her step-son ever spoke of her in his letters. Under the stress of his increasing family the pecuniary condition of the elder Wilson appears to have become less prosperous. Soon after his second marriage he is said to have moved to the Tower of Auchenbothie, but how soon we are unable to say. In 1782, when William Semple published his continuation of George Crawford's "History of

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\* Wilson's "Solitary Tutor."

Renfrewshire," there are two Alexander Wilsons entered as subscribers: "Alex. Wilson, weaver, Long-street, Paisley," and "Alex. Wilson, weaver, New-Town, Ralston, Nielston." Whether these were father and son, or which was which, is difficult to say; or more likely still one of them was another Alex. Wilson of Glanderston in Nielston, whose sister, according to Semple's History, married a local worthy and landed proprietor named Robert Sheddon, somewhere about the year 1755. However this may be, the elder Wilson, after an unsuccessful attempt at farming, returned to Paisley in 1790 and lived in a house in the Seedhills known as the "Douket." Here he remained until his death three years after that of his son, on the 5th of June, 1816.

There is no reason to suppose that the childhood of Wilson was anything but a happy one. His home faced on the river Cart which was the favorite locality for the youngsters of the town to bathe, and the somewhat barren fields were not too bare to furnish a pleasure ground for an imaginative child, for even then he tells us,

"When gath'ring clouds the vaults of heaven o'erspread,  
And opening streams of livid lightning flew;  
From some o'erhanging cliff, the uproar dread,  
Transfix'd in rapt'rous wonder, he would view  
When the red torrent, big and bigger grew."

Of his school days we know little. From all the information that we can gather there was but one regular school in Paisley at this date, the "Latin-Grammar-school" which Wilson attended. As late as 1782 Semple mentions but two other schools,

founded respectively in 1780 and 1781, but the patriotic Semple adds that in his day "there is scarce a boy but what is taught reading, writing, and arithmetic and a part of church music." This, with a little Latin, we may well believe was all that Wilson got, or even more, for we find him having great trouble mastering the rudiments of arithmetic after he was a man.

Those old Scotch schools would make an interesting study. They opened at six in the morning and closed at six in the afternoon, and the books used were, like "Ruddiman's Rudiments" in Latin, continued in use decade after decade. The masters were miserably paid and eked out their living in any way that they could. For specially good services it was sometimes the case that the town-council conferred the honor upon one of them of presenting him with a hat. An interesting illustration of the manner in which they augmented their small salaries is seen in the account that we have of the customs which existed at Dumfries and other places even up to the close of the century, and which were most fruitful sources of income to the teachers—cock-fighting and cock-throwing. "Every boy who could afford it brought a fighting cock to school, and on payment of twelve pennies Scots to the master, the cocks were pitted against each other in the school-room, in the presence of the gentry of the neighborhood. Then the cocks slain in mortal combat became the teacher's property; while those cocks which would not fight, called 'fugies,' were fixed to a stake in the yard and killed one after an-

other at cock-throwing, at one bodle for each shot."\*

It was under such conditions as these that Scotland's youth was taught, and about the most that Wilson acquired was the ability to satisfy his natural love for reading, and to write the clear, legible hand that may still be seen on the indenture of his apprenticeship in the Paisley Museum. In Sir William Jardine's "Memoirs of Wilson" we are told that he was also put under a "Mr. Barlass, then a student of divinity," to study theology, but if this was the case it probably lasted for but a short time, for in his thirteenth year he was apprenticed to William Duncan, the husband of his sister Mary, to learn the trade of a weaver. There is good reason to credit the report that at an earlier date than this he had served for a short while as a "herd" on a farm, not far distant from Paisley, known as Bakerfield. By the terms of his indenture he was to be taught the art of weaving and should receive his "Bed, Board, Washing and Clothing, suitable to his station." The time of this paper is July 31, 1779, and under date of August, 1782, Wilson himself has written on the paper the earliest of his attempts at verse which we have,

"Be't kent to a' the world in rhyme,  
That wi' right mickle wark and toil,  
For three long years I've ser't my time,  
Whiles feasted wi' the hazel oil."

The "three long years" were ended, but bread must be earned, and in spite of the irksomeness of it to the restless and somewhat fragile boy, he went on

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\* "Social Life in Scotland in the Eighteenth Century," II, p. 164.

with his weaving, now at Paisley, now Lochwinnoch, living sometimes with his father and sometimes with his sister's husband in Queensferry. However much he hated the occupation of a weaver—a hate which he gave expression to from time to time throughout his whole life in his poems and letters—yet he found solace in long country walks, at the tavern, and in reading his favorite books. In the depths of the Castle-Semple forest he found a retreat where he could enjoy the poems of Young, Goldsmith, Pope and Shakespeare, or Ramsay, Fergusson, and Burns, who was then just emerging into fame.

At last he wearied of his dull life and started with his former master, William Duncan, from Queensferry to travel through the eastern portions of Scotland as a peddler. In April, 1788, he writes to his old friend David Brodie of his travels; he has met and spent a glorious night with three brother poets, James Kennedy, Ebenezer Picken, and "the immortal author" of that well-known ballad, "The Battle of Bannockburn," "From the Ocean," etc.\* The enthusiasm which Wilson felt was intense. "Blessed meeting," he writes, "never did I spend such a night in all my life. Oh, I was all fire! oh, I was all spirit. \* \* \* I have now a more deep regard for the muse than ever." With a nature like his, little was needed to raise him to the heights of exaltation or cast him to the "slough of despond."

Through the years of 1789-90 Wilson kept up his wanderings, a sort of poetical-peddling tour,

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\* Was this Burns? Burns gives a much later date to the composition of his "Bannockburn."

carrying on his back a packfull of ladies' goods and in his hand a versified "proposal" for the publication of his poems. He was equally ready to turn aside for a prospective purchaser or to see an old ruin of historic interest, or some majestic sight of nature. His letters to his friend David Brodie, who had worked beside him at the loom, breathe a spirit of deep melancholy, and he writes mysteriously of unavoidable misfortunes that gather around his head, which make him doubt "what a day may bring forth."

Everywhere he goes, his eyes are wide open and he sees something to interest him. At Musselburgh he is amused by the gentlemen who devote their time to "the game of golph," and in a little "aside" he whispers to us his opinion that it is "a more healthy than entertaining amusement." His interest is excited by the Solon geese of the Bass,—a great rock in Comley Bay,—while at Dunbar he recalls "the effects of Paul Jones's appearance *in the Frith last war*," who came "so near the place with some of his ships as to demolish some of the chimney tops and put the inhabitants in terrible consternation." He examined the half-moon battery of stone "whereon have been mounted seventeen twelve-pounders as a result of the citizens' fright," and he explores the ruins of the old Dunbar castle with its gloomy caves and foundations of rock jutting into the sea. King's-Horn recalls to him the melancholy death of Alexander III, and the castle of Craig Miller brings him memories of Mary Queen of Scots. His travels throw him among fishermen, butchers, and stock-raisers chiefly, and his one experience with a lady of



quality is a sad one. Encouraged by the reputation of the good Duchess of Buccleugh he mixes in the gaiety of the Dalkeith Fair with the hope of getting her patronage, only to be rewarded by a "soul-piercing" answer, "I don't want any of these things."

His trip, spent partly in soliciting subscriptions to his poems, was unsatisfactory enough, but not half so disappointing as the one he took to deliver the books, for too many refused at last to take the book they had signed their names for; even an old fellow, who agreed to take one if Wilson would sacrifice half the price with him "at the shrine of Bacchus," pleaded that "poverty had frozen up his pockets."

The first edition of his poems came out in the autumn of 1790 and bore on its title page, "Poems by Alexander Wilson, Paisley, Printed by John Neilson for the Author," but he wrote in November that after using every scheme he could invent, no one seemed disposed to encourage him and he was unable even to pay his friend Neilson for the few copies that he had sold.

In the following year he says in a letter, "All the stories you have read of garretts, tatters, unmerciful duns, lank hunger and poetical hunger are all sadly realized in me," and once more he turns for salvation to the hated but profitable loom, finding still some pleasure in his verses, and in an occasional debate at the Pantheon in Edinburgh, where his speeches in verse were "crowned with the most unbounded applause."

Among his friends of these years were his com-

panion of the loom, David Brodie, eccentric but clever and popular; Ebenezer Picken, a University of Glasgow man who forsook his possible career in the church for poetry, became later a teacher and edited a "Scottish Dictionary," but died in poverty in 1815 or '16; James Kennedy, a poet of small local reputation; William McGavin, author of the "Protestant," and good old Thomas Crichton, who of all Wilson's Scottish friends was the truest and most leal. Crichton was born in 1761 and was, therefore, five years Wilson's senior; by profession he was a teacher; he became master of Town's Hospital in 1791 and was elder in Middle Church. He was also a friend of the distinguished President of Princeton University, John Witherspoon, and he did honor to the memory of both of his friends by his reminiscences. He lived to a good old age, not dying until November 18, 1844. It was during these years, too, that Wilson most probably formed the acquaintance of Burns. Dr. Hetherington quotes Mr. P. A. Ramsey of Paisley as authority for the statement that Wilson visited Burns in Ayrshire, and described his visit "in the most rapturous terms." From Wilson's two poems on Burns we know that they knew each other and that Wilson held Burns in the highest personal esteem.

Wilson's second edition of his poems was published in 1791 and was merely the remainder of the old unsold edition with a new title page and some omissions and additions. The title page read, "Poems, Humourous, Satirical, and Serious by Alexander

Wilson, Edinburgh, printed for the author, and sold by P. Hill, 1791."

It was not until the publication of "Watty and Meg," however, in 1792, that any success came to him; but the sale of this poem, which was published in a separate pamphlet, was great. Encouraged by the success of this venture and of another poem, "The Laurel Disputed," which he delivered first, in behalf of Fergusson's poetry, at the Pantheon, at Edinburgh, Wilson threw himself vigorously on the side of the weavers in a controversy with their employers, and with more courage than discretion wrote a series of crude, bitter, satirical verses of which "The Shark" is a good representative. The ire of the local potentates, who were thus attacked, was fired to a white heat and Wilson was forced to burn his verses "At the Cross." His doubtful friend, William McGavin, tells a story of Wilson's having offered to suppress them for five guineas, and there has been published a letter purporting to be the one Wilson wrote. But since there is not sufficient testimony of the authenticity of this, we are disposed to discredit it, as it is not at all in keeping with what we know of Wilson's character.

The William Sharp who was the object of the satirical poem entitled "The Shark" was a man of considerable local prominence as a large owner of property and the employer of many weavers. Though the poem scarcely seems to us to lay the author open to conviction for libel, yet the man who was prosecuting him was able to secure judgment against him and pushed his advantage pitilessly. It

is interesting to note, as I am able to do through the kind information of Mr. John Kent of Paisley, that the well-known man of letters, William Sharp, who died only in 1905, and whose authorship of the poems published over the name of "Fiona McLeod" has just become known, was the grandson of William Sharp, the local potentate of Wilson's day.

Wilson was fined £12 13s. 6d., an amount more than he was able to pay, and was told by way of comfort that his prosecutor, Mr. Sharp, "was resolved to punish him even though at some cost to himself."\* When at last he was free again, disgusted with his harsh treatment, and with his head full of democratic ideas, he very naturally turned his thoughts toward America, whither so many Scotchmen were emigrating. He loved Scotland with a devotion that never grew dim, no, not even in his later years when his love for his adopted country had reached its warmest stage; but he saw that it was best for him to seek his fortunes in a new world. What made it harder to leave Scotland, and yet at the same time wiser, was that he loved a lady,—she whom he addressed in his poems as "Matilda,"—who "was," to quote his friend, good old Thomas Crichton, "snatched by fortune from his arms." Sir William Jardine says, "We have reason to know that the charms of Matilda McLean, the sister of his friend, Mrs. Witherspoon, had materially interfered with his mind's ease." In a new world, however, he could dream the dreams of poetry and realize the dreams of freedom; in a new world what might he not do?

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\* Wilson was confined in jail for a short time.

By the banks of the White Cart, where the gulls were tossing lightly in the wind above them, he bade his few loyal friends farewell, and set out with his nephew, William Duncan, the son of his former employer, to take the ship *Swift* which sailed on the 23rd of May, 1794, for America. It was a beautiful summer afternoon when he looked for the last time with sad and tearful eyes on the receding shores of the old world, but before him danced bright and pleasant visions of "prosperous days on the banks of the Delaware" amid a new people and on alien soil.

## CHAPTER III

### NEW LIFE IN A NEW LAND

"It was a bright warm day in July, 1698," says a Scotch writer, "that the shores and pier of Leith were thronged with dense crowds of people, whose cheers rose loud and jubilant as a tiny fleet of three vessels, with a crew of 1,200 picked men, hoisted sail to cross the Atlantic. This was the first of the expeditions that went forth to Darien as to an El Dorado."

This, the ill-fated dream of William Paterson to improve the conditions of the Scottish people by colonizing the Isthmus of Darien, was the beginning of a great stream of emigrants who were through so many years to seek in the new world their El Dorado. It was nearly a hundred years after that first departure from the pier at Leith, that the ship *Swift* hoisted its sail at Belfast Loch, with three hundred and fifty passengers huddled in together "with scarce a foot for each." Among these emigrants was Alexander Wilson. He had lived, we are told, four months at the expense of only a shilling a week in order to make this possible. By foot he went with his nephew, William Duncan, to Port Patrick, whence he sailed to Belfast, Ireland, where he embarked. Disappointed in his dreams of love and poetry, suspected politically, out of heart with everything about him, the way of betterment which William Paterson had pointed out nearly a hundred summers before seemed to him not a bad one, and

cutting himself loose from all that bound him to his past, he too went to seek his El Dorado. The bright 23rd day of May, 1794, was the beginning of a dismal, wearisome voyage which did not end until the middle of July. Only an old woman and two children died on the vessel before the middle of June and the crew considered themselves lucky indeed; then a sailor dropped overboard and was lost, and two more men were drowned in making the landing. It was indeed a sad trip; only once was its gloominess broken, when Dr. Reynolds, who had been tried and condemned by the Irish House of Lords, was found on board. He treated all round to rum-grog, which was drunk "to the confusion of despots, and the prosperity of liberty all the world over," a sentiment which was perhaps never more really felt than just at this period, and one in which Wilson was ever ready to pledge deeply.

The *Swift* cast anchor first off Reedy Island at seven at night on July 15, and at midday of the 14th, Wilson and Duncan set out on foot to walk the five miles from Newcastle, where they disembarked, to Wilmington, Delaware, in hopes of finding there some weaving to do. Wilson's life in the new world was not to begin very auspiciously, however, for at Wilmington he found, to his surprise, only two silk looms and for himself no employment. His disappointment was not too great for him to note with sharp eyes everything of interest about him. "The writer of this Biography," says George Ord, his friend and collaborator, and the first of his biographers, "has a distinct recollection of a conversation

with Mr. Wilson on this part of his history, wherein he described his sensations on viewing the first bird that presented itself as he entered the forest of Delaware. It was a red-headed woodpecker, which he shot, and considered the most beautiful bird he had ever beheld." Already he was beginning to make the mental notes which were to assist him, not only in the choice of his final great lifework, but also in carrying it through to completion.

On his way over the twenty-nine miles of country from Wilmington to Philadelphia, the rich plumage of the birds, especially the red-birds which flashed their scarlet wings across the road as they passed, interested him and made lighter the journey. Again disappointed in finding work at the loom, and their last farthing gone, the two men "took the first offer of employment" that presented itself; what its nature was Wilson does not say, but there is a suggestion of feeling in his reference to the laborers who had to endure work with "the spade or wheelbarrow under the almost intolerable heat of a scorching sun," that makes us wonder if there is not here a hint of some experience of his own. George Ord says that he was first employed by a fellow countryman, John Aiken, a copperplate printer of Philadelphia. He soon gave this up to work at Pennypack Creek about ten miles from Philadelphia, with Colonel Joshua Sullivan, who apparently proved himself a true friend. For a little while he tried weaving in Virginia, but soon returned again to Pennypack, though he did not remain there very long. During this period he was forced to take up the pack again,



tramping through New Jersey, and for a short time he taught school near Frankfort, Pennsylvania. It was a life of trial and change that he was leading now, so that all of this occurred in the space of less than two years, for by the end of 1795 he was living in Milestown, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania, where he remained, apparently residing through the entire time with one family, until the 1st of May, 1801.

Here he was the teacher of a school of about forty scholars, in the midst of a superstitious but "sober," industrious, and penurious people, who were nearly all Germans. Meanwhile, he studied much himself, mastered the German language, learned and practised surveying, wrote verses occasionally and took his exercise in long cross-country walks or rides. His health during this time was undoubtedly bad, for once or twice he was forced to give up his teaching, but he never complained throughout it all; though to his Scottish friends who questioned him whether they would be wise in coming to America, he wrote that they must consider "the uncertainty of the country agreeing with their constitutions (for it has been, I fear, fatal to mine.)"

William Duncan had not remained with him during these years, but, giving up the loom, he had gone to Ovid, Cayuga County, New York, where he was managing a farm, which he and his uncle possessed together. There a short time later, his mother,—Wilson's sister Mary,—who had come over from the old country, joined him, with her other children.

Wilson's life at Milestown ended suddenly. Just why he left the place we cannot say, but the circum-

stances attending his departure were unhappy and mysterious. The trouble grew out of an affair of the heart, but more than this is not clear. On the 1st of May, 1801, in a short, rather disconnected letter, he wrote to his friend, Charles Orr, a Scotch schoolmaster of Philadelphia: "I have matters to lay before you that have almost distracted me. \* \* \* I have no friend but yourself, and *one* whose friendship has involved us both in ruin, or threatens to do so." Six weeks later he moved to Bloomfield, New Jersey, utterly disgusted with everything in America, and from here he pleaded with Orr to return with him to "Caledonia." He was anxious to know just what was said of him at Milestown without any one's learning where he was, and he begged Orr with pathetic earnestness to find out "how Mrs. — is." Again he wrote, "As to the reports at Milestown, were I alone the subject of them they would not disturb me, but she who loves me dearer than her own soul, whose image is forever with me, whose heart is broken for her friendship to me, she must bear all with not one friend to whom she dare unbosom her sorrows. Of all the events of my life nothing gives me such inexpressible misery as this." Over and over he besought his friend to find out the condition of this unknown lady, but he always cautioned him to let no one know his address. It seems to have been an attachment which grew between Wilson and a lady already married; but Wilson appears to have left the place with honor and discretion as soon as he realized its existence.

Nearly all of the biographers have dwelt on the

fact that Wilson was never seriously in love, but we see how untrue this is when we remember his unsuccessful affair in Scotland and read the really pathetic letters referring to this second woman, whose image he declared "no time nor distance can ever banish" from his mind. We are to find, however, that he was less constant than he thought and was to leave a fair sweetheart to mourn him after his death. We hear nothing more of the episode which caused his departure from Milestown. During the time that he lived at Milestown, Wilson accomplished on foot the journey of nearly eight hundred miles to Ovid, New York, to assist William Duncan in the arrangement of his affairs there. So unfailing was he in his devotion to his loved ones that no exertion was ever too much for him to undertake in their behalf.

In Bloomfield Wilson resumed his interrupted pedagogic duties at the rate of "12 s. per quarter York currency" with thirty-five pupils, but from the first he had no love for the place. The people were more ignorant and even more superstitious than those of Milestown. Even the belief in witches was so prevalent that when a Dutch doctor declared that the trouble with one of his patients was due to the bewitchment of an old woman of the neighborhood, the justice actually issued a warrant by the authority of which she was dragged to the sick man's room in order that he might tear her flesh with his nails and so overcome the spell. Among such people as this, there could be little that was agreeable to a man of Wilson's temperament, so that his appointment to the school near Gray's Ferry, Pennsylvania, came to

him somewhat in the nature of a relief, though teaching was not pleasant to him anywhere. He loved to be out in the open, drinking in the fresh air, following the birds through the forest—in short, as it seemed then, playing truant to the world and its work-a-day problems; and anything which shut him up indoors, whether it were weaving or teaching, was a thing to be hated. On the 25th of February, 1802, he resumed his teaching, having given up his school at Bloomfield some time before this. The Gray's Ferry school paid him one hundred dollars per quarter, and not more than fifty scholars were to be admitted. The discipline here before he came had been disgracefully lax, but with his usual rigid severity—for Wilson believed in the old "spare the rod and spoil the child" adage—he soon brought things into order. Gray's Ferry was to give him the most pleasant years of his life. As early as July of this summer he declared that his harp was "new strung," and his old sanguine aspirations after fame returned. "My heart swells," he said; "my soul rises to an elevation I cannot express, and I think I may yet produce some of these glowing wilds of rural scenery—some new Paties, Rogers, Glauds and Simons,\* that will rank with these favorites of my country when their author has mixed with the kindred clay." The dream was still haunting him that he might follow in the steps of Allan Ramsay and sing his way to fame as Burns had done. The later vision that was to reveal the path of fame to

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\* He refers to Ramsay's "Gentle Shepherd," of which he was very fond.

him in very truth, had not yet dawned upon him, but it was near at hand.

The result of the "new stringing" of Wilson's harp was soon apparent when "The Invitation," a verse letter addressed to Charles Orr, appeared in the *Literary Magazine and American Register* of July, 1804. The magazine, published in Philadelphia, was edited by the talented novelist, Charles Brockden Brown, and the editor hailed the poet in his notes "To Correspondents" in these words: "The author of the poetical epistle published in the present number is thanked for his communication. Any coin from the same mint will always be deemed genuine and current with us." A mild encouragement, which, however, led later to the publication of various other poems, among the best of which were "The Rural Walk" and "The Solitary Tutor." Wilson, in the time that he had been silent, had gained considerable mastery of his measures, and the poems of this period are the finest that he ever wrote, excepting always the earlier "Watty and Meg" and the later "Blue-bird" and "Fish-hawk," or "Osprey."

Meanwhile, things had not gone so well among Wilson's relatives, either in America or in Scotland, in spite of the unselfish assistance which he was ever rendering them whenever he was able to do so. His father's affairs and those of his brothers-in-law were far from bright, while he was ever writing full-hearted, encouraging letters to keep up the spirits of his struggling nephews in Ovid. The elder William Duncan had come to America, where he soon began drinking excessively, and only increased, in-

stead of lightening, the burdens of his sons and brother-in-law. These troubles, united with his own personal difficulties, often brought Wilson's naturally gloomy disposition into what he himself called the "slough of despondency;" but his friendship for the good old naturalist, William Bartram, served as an excellent antidote to his melancholia. Bartram was a man of distinction as a botanist and was somewhat widely known as a writer on ornithology; he had many acquaintances among the naturalists of the day, and above all else he was a level-headed, big-hearted gentleman. He was not slow to notice the unfortunate effect that Wilson's spells of melancholy had on his happiness, and he united with another of Wilson's friends, Alexander Lawson, so to fill up his time with interesting pursuits that there could be no hours left for brooding over his misfortunes. It was about this time, too, that a narrow escape from the accidental discharge of his gun, while he was in the woods alone, startled Wilson to a realization of how, should he die in any uncertain manner, he would be thought to be a suicide. Of this possibility he had great horror, and was as ready as his friends would have him be to enter into their plans. Accordingly, at their suggestion he began the study of birds and of drawing, as a pleasant way to spend his unoccupied moments. His self-given lessons, under the guidance of William Bartram's niece, Miss Ann Bartram, afterward Mrs. Carr, progressed most satisfactorily in spite of having to be carried on chiefly by candlelight, and he was no less successful in his study of the birds themselves, though he knew little of their nomen-

clature. In March, 1804, less than five years before the appearance of the first volume of the "American Ornithology," Wilson sent to Bartram a collection of bird-drawings, which he had made, with the request that he should write their names under them, as, with the exception of three or four, he did not know them. Yet even then the idea of his monumental work was beginning to take some shape in his mind, for as early as June, 1803, he wrote to Thomas Crichton, "I have had many pursuits since I left Scotland—Mathematics, the German Language, Music, Drawing, etc., and now I am about to make a collection of all our finest birds." The idea once in his head was not to leave him. Five days in the week he had no time to spare from his bread-earning school duties, but the other two, with little regard for his ever-weakening health, he sacrificed to the "itch for drawing" which he says he had caught from Alexander Lawson. It was Lawson to whom he wrote in March, 1804, that he meant to carry out his plan "of making a collection of all the birds in this part of North America." He granted that the plan was Quixotic, a sort of "brain windmill," but it was to him one of his "earthly comforts."

There were before him, however, long years of trial and struggle, of study of American birds primarily, and secondarily of American people, before he was at last to realize his ambitions and become famous as the American Ornithologist.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN

Gray's Ferry, Kingessing, Pennsylvania, was a far different place in the first decade of the nineteenth century from what we should find it to-day. Wilson has feelingly painted it in his "Solitary Tutor" and in "The Invitation." The schoolhouse in which he taught was a square stone building of small pretension, down in a "bridge-built hollow" about half a mile from Gray's Ferry and the Schuylkill. Around it on the sloping green "the old gray white-oaks" and the "tufted cedars" shed their grateful shade and a line of tall young poplars stood near in even columns, while behind it rose the forest in whose depths lived Wilson's truest friends, the birds. Across from the school-house green, was the Sorrel-horse Tavern and adjoining it, the white-washed blacksmith's shop. Along the road, especially just before market days, a throng of travelers passed to and from the city, "an ever-varying scene \* \* \* with horsemen, thundering stage and stately team." Not far from the school-building was the house where Wilson lived, a "yellow-fronted cottage" sheltered by great poplars and a weeping willow. In the yard, full of roses and catalpa trees, the hopvines and honeysuckle grew luxuriant, and every sort of fruit ripened on the plentiful boughs, while the woods so near at hand were full of many kinds of birds and the streams plentiful with fish.



Such was Gray's Ferry in the summer season, and if in the winter it lost some of its poetical beauty, when at nighttime the cellar of the schoolhouse echoed with the squalling of cats, and the loft with the rattling of flying squirrels, yet for Wilson it was still a pleasant haven from the dirt and noise of the city. Let no one think, however, that his life was an easy one here. He worked sometimes five, sometimes six days in the week all day long, after the custom of that time, at his school duties, without having even then the assurance of his pay. Not that his work was not satisfactory to his patrons, for it seems to have been eminently so; but the people were not wealthy, and the hard winters sometimes made it impossible for many of the children to attend school. In 1805 the Schuylkill and the Delaware were both impassable and many of the families whose children had been pupils of the Gray's Ferry School were "almost in a state of starvation." At the end of the term fifteen dollars was all that Wilson was able to raise, a sum insufficient to pay even his board. He summoned the trustees together and stated the case, proposing to give up the school, but they would not consent to this; a meeting of the people was called and "forty-eight scholars instantly subscribed for," a sufficient indication of the satisfaction which was felt with Wilson's teaching.

The difficulties through which Wilson had passed previous to this may be imagined when we read a letter to William Duncan that he wrote on his return from his tour to Ovid and Niagara, which is described in "The For-

esters." He found that the people with whom he lived had named a boy after him in his absence and he presented his god-son with six dollars, which, after paying for a cord of wood, left him only three-quarters of a dollar in the world. Yet in his little retreat in the "bridge-built hollow" were conceived some of his best poems and, what is infinitely more, here came to him the notion of writing his ornithology and from here he set out on his first tours. By means of these travels he met many men of distinction and saw with an observing eye the life of many parts of America.

The first of his long journeys was the one to Niagara in the fall of 1804, part of which he traveled in company with William Duncan and part alone. He returned from this expedition on the 7th of December, having walked forty-seven miles the last day; he had been gone two months, during which time he covered between twelve and thirteen hundred miles "through deep snows and almost uninhabited forests; over stupendous mountains, and down dangerous rivers." This was his trial trip, a test of his strength and steadfastness, and he proved himself able to endure much.

There is a true ring of confidence at last in his letter in which he unfolds his proposed journeys to William Bartram: "For all the hazards and privations incident to such an undertaking, I feel confident in my own spirit and resolution. With no family to enchain my affections, no ties but those of friendship, and the most ardent love of my adopted country; with a constitution which hardens amidst

fatigues, and a disposition sociable and open, which can find itself at home by an Indian fire in the depths of the woods, as well as in the best apartment in the civilized world, I have at present a real design of becoming a traveler."

The time was, however, not yet ripe for him; school-teaching gave him no more than a bare support, and in order to travel he must have money. His hopes of being included in the Pike Expedition to the source of the Arkansas, to which we shall refer later, were disappointed, and for a while nothing else appeared by means of which he might carry out his plans.

In the mean time, William Duncan had moved to Pennsylvania to the school in Milestown, which Wilson formerly held, and was anxious that his uncle should visit him and make some political speeches. In reply Wilson wrote that he had already been heard often enough about Milestown and his presence "might open old sores in some" of Duncan's "present friends"; moreover, he said he was determined to let politics alone, hereafter, as begetting many enemies and doing him little good, and he advised Duncan to do the same. "If you and I," he wrote, "attend punctually to the duties of our profession, and make our business our pleasure,—and the improvement of our pupils, with their good government, our chief aim,—honor and respectability and success will assuredly attend us, even if we never open our lips on politics." Nor did he ever depart from this position in regard to political matters.

Wilson was blessed in forming a few singularly

good friends. William Bartram, whose Botanic Gardens and wide acquaintance among scientific men had meant so much to Wilson, had directed his attention to ornithology, and taught him all he knew himself; Alexander Lawson, the engineer and engraver, interested him in drawing and etching, and later engraved his plates for him at a nominal cost "for the sake of old Scotland," and now his good genius brought him to the attention of Mr. S. F. Bradford, a publisher and bookseller of the firm of Bradford and Inskeep, of Third street, Philadelphia. Bradford was about to bring out an edition of Ree's New Cyclopaedia in twenty-two quarto volumes, and Wilson was employed at a salary of nine hundred dollars per year as assistant editor.

On the 1st of April, 1806, after nearly ten troublesome years of teaching, he resigned the school at Gray's Ferry and moved into Philadelphia, where he applied himself with the closest attention to his editorial duties and to preparing himself to undertake the writing of his ornithology. Very soon after his connection with Bradford and Inskeep began, he unfolded to Mr. Bradford his scheme for the publication of his proposed book and was promised the publisher's support. From this moment to his last day he was ever busy on this project so dear to his heart, now drawing with indefatigable energy, now roaming with the prospectus of the "Ornithology" through the country, soliciting subscribers for a book that was to cost one hundred and twenty dollars.

From his earliest youth, Wilson had let no opportunity for self-improvement slip from him;

and now he was busy taking notes on everything he saw, studying the people and the country as he passed.

In September, 1808, the first volume of the monumental "American Ornithology" appeared, but to Wilson it was a mere earnest of what he might do if he only had the means. The book was a very costly one and even at the rate of one hundred and twenty dollars per set he would have to secure a large number of subscribers to make his expenses clear. A long and bitter training had put somewhat of masterfulness into his nature, and if he had no way to carry his plan through he must make one. So he began the long toilsome journeys, of the fatigue of which even his letters give us, perhaps, but a dim picture. But the opportunity of learning his adopted country, to which he was now devoted, soul and body, and of meeting face to face his audience, was fraught with possibilities which Wilson was not blind to, and the observations on contemporary life which he has left in his somewhat hasty personal letters are exceedingly valuable, but must always be judged in view of the man who wrote them, and the circumstances under which they were made. Familiar as he had ever been with sorrow and poverty, Wilson's naturally melancholy disposition deepened, and though he was of too earnest and steadfast a disposition not to be very hopeful in his general philosophy of life, yet he was wont to form too gloomy an opinion of the special conditions with which he came into contact. It is also to be remembered that his

point of view was that of a stranger who was often looked upon with the disapproval which is not infrequently met by the book agent, for such, doubtless, many then regarded Wilson. In spite of this, however, when we have allowed for the constitutional moods of the man, his powers of observation were remarkably keen, and the sincerity and truthfulness of his purpose were always unimpeachable. Everywhere he went he found much both to praise and to censure. On his pilgrimages he visited almost every college then of importance in the country, and nearly every one subscribed to his book for its library, receiving its author with courtesy. At Princeton President Smith received him kindly and was surprised and pleased with the work. The professors of Columbia were even more hearty in their commendation, especially the professor of languages, who, "being a Scotchman and also a Wilson," would have done him any favor in his power. The *literati* of New Haven received him with "politeness and respect" and he described with interest the "streets shaded with elm trees and poplars," the large common covered with grass, and the four or five wooden spires which had once been so infested with woodpeckers that "it became necessary to set people, with guns, to watch and shoot these invaders of the sanctuary."

Later he was honorably entertained by President Wheelock at Dartmouth, where the professors vied with each other in obliging him, and at William and Mary on his later Southern trip he was received with distinction by Bishop Madison.

In New England he met some veterans of the battle of Bunker Hill with whom he visited the old battlefield, and one may see in his letter about this visit how truly American he had become. "I felt," he declared, "as though I could have encountered a whole battalion myself in the same glorious cause."

On the Southern trip which followed the tour through New England, Wilson expressed his opinion in his letters as freely as he had done in the other case. In Maryland he was disgusted with the negroes huddled up with "their filthy bundles of rags around them," but Washington he thinks "a noble place for a great metropolis." Even then, "the taverns and boarding-houses" were crowded with an odd assemblage of characters: "Fat placemen, expectants, contractors, petitioners, office-hunters, lumber-dealers, salt-manufacturers, and numerous other adventurers."

Neither Virginia nor Carolina satisfied him altogether. The streets of Norfolk shocked him by their "disgraceful state"; Southampton County by its almost impassable roads. In North Carolina he is astonished by the customary morning drinking of toddies; "you scarcely meet a man," he wrote, "whose lips are not parched or chapped or blistered with drinking this poison." Of the taverns he remarked that they were "the most desolate and beggarly imaginable; bare, bleak and dirty walls; one or two old broken chairs and a bench form all the furniture."

As a matter of fact there were not many taverns in the South in those days; the open-house

hospitality of the people made little need for houses of public entertainment.

It was the better side of the Southern life that Wilson was unable to see; for whatever else they were the Southerners were a people of aristocratic traditions, and a man who came among them an unintroduced stranger taking subscriptions for a book which most of them knew and asked little about, naturally enough did not see the best that was here, any more than he had done in New England. "As to the character of the North Carolinians," he added, "were I to judge of it by the specimens I met with in taverns, I should pronounce them to be the most ignorant, debased, indolent and dissipated portion of the Union. But I became acquainted with a few such noble exceptions, that, for *their* sakes, I am willing to believe that they are all better than they seemed to be." Here is merely an example of the truth that every chance traveler must remember—it is the scum of society, as well as of other things, that is always seen the easiest, because it floats on the surface. Wilson was a man whom his best friends found of the "*genus irritabile*," and any discourtesy or inattention shown to him he deeply resented and was slow to forget. Under the influence of the temperamental effects of some real or supposed slight he undoubtedly saw the darker side of things. It is not strange then that after several unanswered requests for lists of probable subscribers to his "Ornithology" he should declare the Southern people to be cursed with an "abject and disgrace-



ful listlessness." In these generalizations, hurriedly expressed in his letters when he was tired out and out of patience with the people that he had canvassed all day, he was often at fault, but in his special remarks and his descriptions of the things that he actually saw he was almost always accurate.

From Savannah Wilson had expected to return home by water, but as a matter of fact we learn from a letter written to his father that he did not do so, for he wrote that he had "visited every town within one hundred and fifty miles of the Atlantic Coast, from the River St. Lawrence to St. Augustine in Florida," yet he is still doubtful whether he can cover the cost of the publication, or must suffer the sacrifice "of the little all" that he has. With this letter he sent to his father that epoch-making first volume of his "Ornithology," the book which stands almost as the very first—for the little work which had been done by Thomas Jefferson and William Bartram was inconsiderable—example of ornithological literature in America, and which announced the birth of a new study in the United States.

A decade and a half had passed away now since Wilson came to America, and through these years there had been going on a slow but very real modification in the man. The Wilson who had burned his own verses by compulsion at the Cross of Paisley was a Scotchman through and through; even his liberality of view and love of freedom were a part of the Scotch character, and his by inheritance. Years later when after his Milestown

experience he proposed to Orr to leave this "unworthy country," he was showing that not yet had he become thoroughly American in feeling, but even then the change was taking place. By friendships and courtesies, through perils by land and water, in common dangers and common interests, slowly, surely, unfailingly, his character was being fused in the crucible of life until it became as distinctly American as that of the best native-born man with whom he worked and lived.

The love of his own native land was never to fail utterly nor grow dim, but it became second to that which he felt to this land where at last his dreams began to fade into reality. It was for the love of this new country of his that he began his journey and endured his hardships, and now at length he began to see, as so many others have seen, that by following where love had first led him he might come to receive what had before been denied him, the fulfilment of his dreams of fame. As truly representative of the Scotland of his day as he had been, he became no less representative now of the America in which he lived. A republican of the most enthusiastic order, familiar with American men and forests, and cities, from Maine to Florida, a political speaker at times, and a writer of political verse, the man had become an American indeed when he could say in a letter to his father that he would "willingly give a hundred dollars"—a big sum with him just then—"if he could spend a few days in Paisley," but that he "would again wing his way across the western waste of water, to the peaceful and happy regions of America."

## CHAPTER V

### WILSON AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICANS

Alexander Wilson was a man almost wholly self-educated, used rather to the rough customs of a weaver's cottage than the polished manners of a drawing-room: life and the world had used him roughly, and a haughtiness and cold reserve, which was lost in animation when one knew him, raised a barrier between him and the stranger, yet among his acquaintances were some of the foremost men of the day. From these men Wilson received much both of education and inspiration, and the pleasure and interest which he took in meeting them meant no little to one who had known so few of the sweeter things of life.

Perhaps the most important influence in Wilson's life was the friendship of the good old botanist, William Bartram, of whom we have already spoken. John Bartram, the father of Wilson's friend, who was a man of no little distinction himself, laid out the beautiful Botanical Gardens where the son afterward lived, and like his son he was known for his writings on various subjects, usually connected with natural history.

Closely following in his father's footsteps, the son was perhaps even more distinguished, and was able to bring Wilson into acquaintance with many men of note. He was considerably older than Wilson, but so kindred were their natures that this difference in age never interfered with

the close friendship that only blossomed with the years. Bartram wrote in a clear, vivid style, and the year or two which Wilson spent at his house in his latter years scarcely drew him into closer contact with the refining influence of the man's character and methods than he had already been brought by his earlier study of his prose.

C. W. Peale, the founder of the Peale Museum in Philadelphia, which was then situated in old "Independence Hall," was also able to assist in broadening his acquaintance among helpful people, and to bring him more markedly into the notice of the scientific world.

If these men living in the same town with him had a more intimate influence on Wilson's life, they are still scarcely more interesting to us than are the noteworthy men that he met in his travels. We have spoken of the presidents and professors of the various colleges, who entertained him with a courtesy which did them credit. There were other men, too, better known than these, who lent to him an encouragement that was no small factor in helping him endure heroically the struggles that were necessary before success might be gained. In New York, Dr. Samuel Mitchell, and Scudder of the American Museum, were his friends, and Governor De Witt Clinton both appreciated him in life and took pleasure in doing him honor after death. It is pleasing to note this, for it is another Governor of New York, Daniel D. Tompkins, who hurt so deeply Wilson's feelings by his cold treatment. "He turned over a few pages, looked at a picture or two,

asked me my price," wrote Wilson, "and while in the act of closing the book, added, 'I would not give a hundred dollars for all the birds you intend to describe, even had I them alive.'"

With F. A. Michaux, the Frenchman, whose work on "American Forest Trees" is still remembered, he corresponded and kept up a friendship, and was always ready to assist him whenever he could.

Another acquaintance which is especially interesting is that with Tom Paine. Wilson had been in his earlier days an ardent advocate of republicanism and Paine was to him then quite a hero. As early as 1792 in his by no means remarkable "Address to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr" this verse occurs:

"The 'Rights of Man' is now weel kenned,  
And read by mony a hunder;  
For Tammy Paine the buik has penned,  
And lent the Courts a lounder;  
It's like a keeking-glass to see  
The craft of Kirk and statesmen;  
And wi' a bauld and easy glee  
Guid faith the birky beats them  
Aff hand this day."

The passing of years cooled his blood and modified, though it did not change, his opinions. It is, in the light of these facts, both interesting and gratifying to find that Wilson in 1808 called on Paine, which visit he himself describes: "While in New York I had the curiosity to call on the celebrated author of the 'Rights of Man.' He lives in Greenwich, a short way from the city. In the only decent-looking apartment of a small, indiffer-

ent-looking frame house, I found this extraordinary man, sitting wrapped in a nightgown, the table before him covered with newspapers, with pen and ink beside him. Paine's face would have excellently suited the character of Bardolph; but the penetration and intelligence of his eye bespeaks the man of genius, and of the world. He complained to me of his inability to walk, an exercise he was formerly fond of; he examined my book, leaf by leaf, with great attention—desired me to put his name down as a subscriber,” and then requested to be remembered to some friends that he and Wilson had in common. The ornithologist remembered the meeting with evident pleasure.

From Wilson's letters we also learn that he knew General Wade Hampton and was a friend of the ill-fated but distinguished Governor of Louisiana, Meriwether Lewis of the famous Lewis-Clark Expedition.\*

It was in the winter of 1808 in Washington that Wilson first met General James Wilkinson, and a few months later he called on him again in Charleston, South Carolina, and received from him twelve dollars on his subscription to the “Ornithology,” which he says was “the first fruits” of his project. Whatever may have been the faults and failings of Wilkinson,—and they were perhaps many,—he deserves some charity from us for this deed of kindness which he did to our first American ornithologist when he so much needed encouragement.

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\* See “History of the Expedition under Command of Lewis and Clark,” by Elliott Coues; Frances P. Harper, New York, 1893.

The letter written by Wilkinson to Thomas Jefferson, which will be presently given, presents very clearly the opinion which General Wilkinson held of the ornithologist.

The relation of Wilson with Thomas Jefferson has been dwelt upon with emphasis by almost every one who has essayed anything at all on the former, and the fact that Wilson seems to have received no reply to his request to be sent with Pike on his expedition has been made the text of violent philippics against Jefferson from Wilson's earliest biographer, George Ord, down through the list, with one or two exceptions. The letters, which are published here for the first time in full, throw valuable light on the relations which existed between these two remarkable men. Wilson was no hero-worshiper; on the contrary he was an extremist in his belief in the equality of man. He admired Tom Paine, but likened his nose to that of Bardolph, and though himself holding Washington as "our country's glory, pride and boast," he was amused at the enthusiasm with which men adored him. But Jefferson was his hero of heroes: "the enlightened philosopher,—the distinguished naturalist,—*the first statesman on earth*, the friend, the ornament of science \* \* that father of our country, the faithful guardian of our liberties"; how could he but love him with a love which came almost to worship, since after all these things did Wilson most earnestly seek? To him he was "the best of men" and at his reelection as President he cried out, "This day the heart of every republican, of every good man,

within the immense limits of our happy country, will leap with joy."

At this time Wilson had but recently returned from his trip to Niagara, and, knowing Jefferson's enthusiastic interest in science, he sent him a drawing of two birds with which he had met for the first time, "as the child of an amiable parent," he wrote to Bartram, "presents to its affectionate father some little token of its esteem." The letter which accompanied the drawing is as follows:

"Sir

"I beg your acceptance of a small trifle in Natural History which though imperfectly executed is offered with all the sincerity of affection to the best Friend and brightest ornament of this happy country. If it afford you a moment's amusement I shall think myself amply rewarded.

"On my return from a visit to the Falls of Niagara in October last I killed two birds on the shores of the Mohawk river and conceiving them to be little known, particularly the Jay, I have taken the liberty of transmitting under favor of Mr. Bartram as faithful a sketch of them as I was capable of taking. The Jay approaches nearly to the *Corvus Canadensis* of Linnæus and Le Geay brun of Buffon differing however in the color and article of crest so much as to seem to be a distinct species. From several other birds found while on the same Tour I am inclined to believe that many subjects still remain to be added to our Nomenclature in the Ornithology of the middle and northern states.



"Permit me now to ask your Excellency's forgiveness for this intrusion. Rejoicing with a grateful country on the prospects of reaping the fruits of your pre-eminent services for many years I implore Heaven to bless and preserve a life so honourable to Science and so valuable to the Republican institutions of a great and rapidly increasing Empire and beg leave to Subscribe myself

"With deepest veneration,  
 "Your Excellency's sincere Friend  
 and humble Servant  
 "ALEX WILSON."

"Kingsess March 18th, 1805."

The President responded with a letter full of interest and courtesy which we print in full:

"Monticello Apr. 7, 05.

"Sir

"I received here yesterday your favor of March 18, with the elegant drawings of the new birds you found on your tour to Niagara, for which I pray you to accept my thanks. The Jay is quite unknown to me, from my observations while in Europe, on the birds & quadrupeds of that quarter, I am of opinion there is not in our continent a single bird or quadruped which is not sufficiently unlike all the members of it's family there to be considered as specifically different. on this general observation I conclude with confidence that your Jay is not a European bird.

"The first bird on the same sheet I judge to

be a *Muscicapa* from it's bill, as well as from the following circumstance. Two or three days before my arrival here a neighbor killed a bird, unknown to him, & never before seen here as far as he could learn. it was brought to me soon after I arrived; but in the dusk of the evening, and so putrid that it could not be approached but with disgust. But I obtained a sufficiently exact idea of it's form and colours to be satisfied it is the same with yours. the only difference I find in yours is that the white on the back is not so pure, and that the one I saw had a little of a crest. Your figure, compared with the white bellied *Gobemouche* 8 Buff 342, Pl. enlum 566 shews a near relation. Buffon's is dark on the back.

"As you are curious in birds there is one well worthy your attention, to be found or rather heard in every part of America, & yet scarcely ever to be seen. It is in all the forests from spring to fall, and never but on the tops of the tallest trees from which it perpetually serenades us with some of the sweetest notes, & as clear as those of the nightingale. I have followed it miles without ever but once getting a good view of it. it is the size and make of the Mocking bird, lightly thrush-colored on the back, & a grayish white on the breast & belly. mr. Randolph, my son-in-law, was in possession of one which had been shot by a neighbor. he pronounced this also a *Muscicapa*, and I think it much resembling the *Moucherolle de la Martinique* 8 Buffon 374 pl. enlum 658. as it abounds in all the neighborhood of Philadelphia,

you may perhaps by patience and perseverance (of which much will be requisite) get a sight, if not possession of it.

"I have for 20 years interested the young sportsmen of my neighborhood to shoot me one; but as yet without success.

"Accept my salutations and assurances of respect.

"TH : JEFFERSON"

The suggested commission at the close of this letter was received by Wilson with enthusiasm. He wrote at once to Bartram and Duncan, that their efforts might be added to his own in searching out this strange bird, and after a long and arduous pursuit it was found that the naturalists had been misguided by Jefferson's suggestion that "it was never found but on the tops of the tallest trees" and the bird was identified as the Wood Robin, which, on the contrary, is so often on the ground as to give it, as Ord remarks, one of its names, the Ground Robin. This gave Wilson the occasion for a second letter to Jefferson which, from its nature, did not require an answer. As this letter has not hitherto been published it is printed here.

"Kingsess Sep 30th 1805

"Sir

"I had the honor last spring of presenting your Excellency with drawings of two birds which I supposed to be nondescript until the receipt of your very condescending Letter to me of Ap. 7th referring to 8 Buffon 342 Pl. en lum 566 which I

find to contain a Bird of the same Species with one of those sent but unnoticed by me before. Allow me Sir as an atonement for this mistake to beg your acceptance of another sheet of Drawings being my poor efforts to represent faithfully 4 of our most capital Songsters among which is (I believe) the Bird\* so particularly and accurately described in your Excellency's letter to me. This being the only bird I can find among all our Songsters corresponding in every respect with the description there given. The clearness and plaintive sweetness of its notes, its solitary disposition—continually serenading us from the tops of the tallest trees—its colour, size and resemblance to the Moucherelle de la Martinique of Buffon, as observed by your Excellency, designate this, (and my friend Mr. Bartram is of the same opinion) to be the Bird so justly esteemed by your Excellency.

"Finding, as I do, an innocent and delightful retreat from the sometimes harassing business of Life in our Rural Solitudes I have employed some of my leisure hours in Drawing many of these charming Songsters of the Grove with a view at some future day of publishing in a more finished manner all the Birds resident in or which Emigrate to the United States from the South & North. May I hope that your Excellency will not think meanly of my feeble attempts or of the motives which have induced me to intrude at this time on your precious hours devoted to the In-

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\* A reference is given here to the numbering of the figures on the plate.

terests and happiness of an immense Country. These motives are, the most affectionate regard and veneration for your Excellency as the friend of Science and the '*best hope*' of virtuous Republicans; and the fond but humble hope of meriting your esteem.

"Your Excellency's devoted friend and humble  
Servt

"ALEX WILSON."

The next episode is the one which has occasioned so much bitter criticism from Wilson's biographers. Wilson, seeing in the newspapers that Jefferson designed having the shores of the Mississippi explored, sought to persuade William Bartram to apply with him for a place on the expedition. Failing in this, since Bartram thought himself unable to endure the hardships of travel, he enclosed a letter of recommendation from Bartram, who knew Mr. Jefferson, in one of his own, requesting to be sent on "any of these expeditions." Three weeks later he wrote his nephew that he had heard nothing from the President and remarked that "no hurry of business could excuse it," if Mr. Jefferson received the letters. This matter is, however, now explained by the letters of Jefferson and Wilkinson. The following note shows the esteem in which Jefferson held Wilson as early as 1807:

"Th: Jefferson having a few days ago only received a copy of the printed proposals for publishing a work on American ornithology by mr. Wil-

son, begs leave to become a subscriber to it, satisfied it will give us valuable new matter as well as correct the errors of what we possessed before. he salutes mr. Wilson with great respect.

"Washington Oct. 9, 07."

A year later when Wilson was in Washington soliciting subscribers he called at the White House to see the President, sending in the following note to announce himself:

"Alexander Wilson, author of 'American Ornithology,' would be happy to submit the first volume of this work to the inspection of Mr. Jefferson, if he knew when it would be convenient for the President.

A. WILSON.

"Saturday Noon.

"Endorsed: Alexr Wilson, recd Dec. 17, 08."

Wilson himself thus describes his reception in a letter to his friend, Mr. D. H. Miller: "The President received me very kindly. I asked for nobody to introduce me, but merely sent him a line that I was there; when he ordered me to be immediately admitted. He has given me a letter to a gentleman in Virginia, who is to introduce me to a person there, who, Mr. Jefferson says, has spent his whole life in studying the manners of our birds; and from whom I am to receive a world of facts and observations. The President intended to send for this person himself, and to take down, from his mouth, what he knows on the subject, thinking it a pity, as he says, that the

knowledge he possesses should die with him. But he has intrusted the business to me, and I have promised him an account of our interview."

Before leaving Washington Wilson wrote the following letter to the President, which, as far as I have been able to find, is the last one which has been preserved of those exchanged between them.

"Washington City Decr 24th 1808

"Sir

"The person who is the Bearer of this, has in his possession specimens of *Copper Ore* found in Orange County, State of Virginia, which he is solicitous to show to the President. Considering this discovery (if the facts be as he states) highly important at this interesting crisis I have advised him to wait on you without delay.

"I have succeeded, tolerably, among the gentlemen here, in procuring subscriptions to my Publication; and leave this place to-day. I shall remit you an account of my interview with Coffer, and am, with consideration of high respect,

"Sir,

"Your obedt Humble Servt

"ALEX WILSON."

Why Jefferson did not answer Wilson's letter in reference to the Pike expedition above referred to is best explained by the supposition that he either never received it or else referred it to General Wilkinson, who had entire control of all the arrangements for the expedition of Lieutenant Z.

M. Pike. Jefferson carefully preserved every scrap of his correspondence, but he declared on looking over his papers that he was unable to find a "scrip of the pen" on the subject. Moreover, Wilson never felt the slightest bitterness against Jefferson, as Ord himself states he never gave expression to any hurt which the President's silence caused him.

When Ord's life of Wilson appeared in the last volume of the "American Ornithology" the sharp criticism of Mr. Jefferson's neglect came to the notice of Mr. Jefferson himself, who wrote the following letter to General Wilkinson in regard to the matter:

"Monticello June 25, '18.

"Dear General

"A life so much employed in public as yours has been, must subject you often to be appealed to for facts by those whom they concern—an occasion occurs to myself of asking this kind of aid from your memory and documents. the posthumous volume of Wilson's Ornithology, altho' published some time since, never happened to be seen by me until a few days ago. in the account of his life, prefixed to that volume his biographer indulges himself in a bitter invective against me, as having refused to employ Wilson on Pike's expedition to the Arkansas, on which particularly he wished to have been employed. on turning to my papers I have not a scrip of the pen on the subject of that expedition, which convinces me that it was not one of those which emanated from



myself; and if a decaying memory does not deceive me I think it was ordered by yourself from St. Louis, while Governor and military commander there; that it was an expedition for reconnoitering the Indian and Spanish positions which might be within striking distance; that so far from being an expedition admitting a leisurely and scientific examination of the natural history of the country, it's movements were to be on the alert, and too rapid to be accommodated to the pursuits of scientific men; that if previously communicated to the Executive, it was not in time for them, from so great a distance, to have joined scientific men to it; nor is it probable it could be known at all to Mr. Wilson and to have excited his wishes and expectations to join it. if you will have the goodness to consult your memory and papers on this subject, and to write me the result you will greatly oblige me.

"My retirement placed me at once in such a state of pleasing freedom and tranquility, that I determined never more to take any concern in public affairs; but to consider myself merely as a passenger in the public vessel, placed under the pilotage of others, in whom too my confidence was entire. I therefore discontinued all correspondence on public subjects, and was satisfied to hear only so much as true or false, as a newspaper or two could give me. in these I sometimes saw matters of much concern, and particularly that of your retirement. a witness myself of the merit of your services while I was in a situation to know and to feel their benefit, I made

no enquiry into the circumstances which terminated them, whether moving from yourself or others. with the assurances, however, that my estimate of their value remains unaltered, I pray you to accept that of my great and continued esteem and respect.

"TH: JEFFERSON."

General Wilkinson's letter which follows shows conclusively that the Pike Expedition was under his direction.

"August 4th 1818

"Dear Sir

"Residing as I do on the right bank of the Mississippi seven Leagues below N. Orleans, it is no matter of surprise that your letter, of the 25th. of June, was not received before the 1st Inst.

"I perceive with great pleasure, that the chaste harmony which has distinguished your Pen above all others of our Country continues unimpaired; and with equal satisfaction do I receive the testimony of approbation & esteem which it conveys, to an humble but faithful citizen, who has been illy requited for his toils, sufferings and sacrifices in the public Service.

"I acknowledge the receipt of your Letter merely to show you that I shall fulfill your desire respecting the explorations of Capt. Pike under my orders, as soon as indispensable daily labor may allow me time to scrutinize my voluminous correspondence; in the mean time memory authorizes me to declare, that, under a verbal per-

mission from you, before my departure from the seat of Government for St. Louis in the Spring of 1805, *generally* to explore the borders of the Territory of Louisiana I did project the expeditions of Capt. Z. M. Pike to the Head of the Mississippi; and after his return from the excursion, to restore to the Nation a number of Osage Indians, who have been ransomed under my authority, from the hostile Tribes by whom they had been captured; to make peace between certain Belligerous Nations, and if practicable to effect an interview with and conciliate the powerful bands of I. C. taws or Comanches to the United States. He was also instructed by me to ascertain the extent, direction, and navigableness of the Arkansas and Red Rivers, which discharge their Waters in the Mississippi.

"I recollect to have seen Mr. Wilson the ornithologist, at Washington in the autumn of 1808, and at Charlestown, S. C., the Winter following; I admired his Enterprise, perseverance and capacity and had several conversations with Him concerning the Work he had undertaken, which I was desirous to promote with my humble means; He made various enquiries respecting the feathered creation of this region, and instructed me how to preserve in dead Birds their living appearance; But I do not remember that Capt. Pike or his expeditions were alluded to, and the details of that unfortunate meritorious young Soldier's Western Tour published by himself, will best explain its utter inaptitude to the deliberate investigations of the naturalist.

"With my best wishes for your continued Health and tranquility, and in the Hope that you may still be made the instrument to arrest the sinister cause of our politics, and recall the Republic to its original purity, I beg you to be assured of my high respect and attachment.

"JA: WILKINSON."

These letters, which I believe have never before been published, should be enough to establish that instead of Jefferson's being "forgetful alike of the duties of his station, and the common courtesies of life" and refusing "encouragement to the cultivation of science and literature"; so far was he from losing "the opportunity of having won himself imperishable honour, by patronizing a man of true genius, of nature's own nobility—the high nobility of mind," he on the contrary was among Wilson's first subscribers, received him with courtesy and attention, and even after his death wrote to his son-in-law, Joseph Coolidge, in 1825, requesting him to endeavor to have a new octavo edition of Wilson's Ornithology published in Boston; a further indication of his high opinion of the man and his work. It has been many years since the last biography of Alexander Wilson was written, and it is now high time that instead of condemning Jefferson for an apparent breach of courtesy, the circumstances of which we do not thoroughly know, we should render him all honor for the real encouragement which he gave the naturalist, an encouragement which, to Wilson, was no small matter.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE COMPLETION OF THE ORNITHOLOGY

We return now to the story of Wilson's endeavors to carry out his great plan, at the point where we left off at the end of our fourth chapter. How much the publication of the first volume of the *Ornithology* meant to Wilson as encouragement in his work and as a stimulus to increased exertions it is impossible to estimate, but its moral effect was doubtless great. He was no longer to be regarded as a mere dreamer, for in part his promise had been kept; he had shown his ability to carry his plan through.

His eagerness to send the next volume to the press was almost feverish, and by the fall of 1809 it was ready for the engraver, though nearly a year elapsed before it appeared. In the mean while, Wilson was eagerly searching out the habits of every bird with which he met, using every possible means to unravel the knots that perplexed him. He lost no opportunity of catechising every one with whom he came into contact; President Jefferson, General Wilkinson, John Abbott, the student of insect life in Savannah, Georgia; Michaux, whose work on "*American Forest Trees*" so much interested him; Bishop Madison of Virginia; his own nephew, William Duncan; Peale, of Philadelphia, and chief of all, his old friend William Bartram, he interested in his studies and from them all drew what help and information he could. The

earnest enthusiasm of the man was contagious, and from all over the country came letters, drawings, and sketches from people whose interest in birds had been awakened by him.

The drawings were not such that he could make actual use of them in his book, nor were the observations or the skins of birds which were sent to him often of much worth, but they all served as so much evidence by which he could make comparisons with what he himself had collected, and these things thus made it possible for him to examine his data very critically.

Soon he had exhausted his collected materials and was determined on another journey. His travels this time were to extend from Pittsburg to Florida through the interior. On this trip he again hoped to be accompanied by his old friend, William Bartram, but once more Bartram's advancing years made it scarcely possible for him to endure such hardships, and Wilson set out alone. After considering the three modes of travel open to him, by horse-back, by stage-coach or on foot, he finally decided that walking was better adapted to both his observations and his pocket-book—he figured that he could thus keep his expenses down to an average of a dollar a day. Accordingly, he began his journey, first stopping at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where the Governor subscribed to his book. Columbia proved a fruitless field, and after crossing the Susquehanna, through the floating ice, he reached York. At Hanover "a certain judge took upon himself to say, that such a book \* \* \* ought not to be encouraged, as it was not within the

reach of the commonality; and therefore inconsistent with our republican institutions." After a serious disputation with Wilson, however, in which Wilson proved him "a greater culprit \* \* \* in erecting a large three-story brick house so much beyond the reach of the commonality, as he called them, and consequently contrary to our republican institutions," this "Solomon of the Bench \* \* \* began to show such symptoms of intellect as to seem ashamed of what he said." From here, Wilson visited Chambersburg and the College at Carlisle and reached Pittsburg on the 15th of February, 1810. The journey, save for its fatigue, was one of great enjoyment to him, and his chief regret was that he could not share it with his friends. At Pittsburg he put his baggage into a little skiff, and on February 23, after writing his farewell and blessing to his Philadelphia friends, he shoved off his boat, which he had named the "Ornithologist," into the ice-encumbered river, for Cincinnati. Not until April 4 did he write from Lexington, Kentucky, which was the second stage of his bird-catching expedition. Of his journey on leaving Pittsburg he wrote:

"Though generally dissuaded from venturing by myself on so long a voyage down the Ohio in an open skiff, I considered this mode, with all its inconveniences, as the most favourable to my researches and the most suitable to my funds, and I determined accordingly. Two days before my departure, the Alleghany River was one wide torrent of broken ice, and I calculated on experiencing considerable difficulties on this score. My stock of provisions

consisted of some biscuit and cheese, and a bottle of cordial presented me by a gentleman of Pittsburg; my gun, trunk and great-coat occupied one end of the boat; I had a small tin occasionally to bale her, and to take my beverage from the Ohio with; and bidding adieu to the smoky confines of Pittsburg, I launched into the stream, and soon winded away among the hills that everywhere enclose this noble river. The weather was warm and serene, and the river like a mirror except where the floating masses of ice spotted its surface, and which required some care to steer clear of; but these to my surprise, in less than a day's sailing, totally disappeared. Far from being concerned at my new situation, I felt my heart expand with joy at the novelties which surrounded me; I listened with pleasure to the whistling of the Red-bird on the banks as I passed, and contemplated the forest scenery as it receded, with increasing delight. The smoke of the numerous sugar-camps, rising lazily among the mountains, gave great effect to the varying landscape; and the grotesque log-cabins, that here and there opened from the woods, were diminished into mere dog-houses by the sublimity of the impending mountains. If you suppose to yourself two parallel ranges of forest-covered hills, whose irregular summits are seldom more than three or four miles apart, winding through an immense extent of country, and enclosing a river half a mile wide, which alternately washes the steep declivity on one side, and laves a rich flat forest-clad bottom on the other, of a mile or so in breadth, you will have a pretty correct idea of the appearance of the



Ohio. The banks of these rich flats are from twenty to sixty and eighty feet high, and even these last were within a few feet of being overflowed in December, 1808.

"I now stripped, with alacrity, to my new avocation. The current went about two and a half miles an hour, and I added about three and a half miles more to the boat's way with my oars. In the course of the day I passed a number of arks, or, as they are usually called, Kentucky boats, loaded, with what it must be acknowledged are the most valuable commodities of the country: viz. men, women, and children, horses and ploughs, flour, millstones, &c. Several of these floating caravans were loaded with store goods for the supply of the settlements through which they passed, having a counter erected, shawls, muslins, &c., displayed, and everything ready for transacting business. On approaching a settlement they blow a horn or tin trumpet, which announces to the inhabitants their arrival. I boarded many of these arks, and felt much interested at the sight of so many human beings, migrating like birds of passage to the luxuriant regions of the south and west. The arks are built in the form of a parallelogram, being from twelve to fourteen feet wide, and from forty to seventy feet long, covered above, rowed only occasionally by two oars before, and steered by a long and powerful one fixed above. \* \* \*

"The barges are taken up along shore by setting poles, at the rate of twenty miles or so a day; the arks cost about one hundred and fifty cents per foot, according to their length; and when they

reach their places of destination, seldom bring more than one-sixth their original cost. These arks descend from all parts of the Ohio and its tributary streams, the Alleghany, Monongahela, Muskingum, Scioto, Miami, Kentucky, Wabash, &c., in the months of March, April and May particularly, with goods, produce and emigrants, the two former for markets along the river, or at New Orleans, the latter for various parts of Kentucky, Ohio, and the Indiana Territory. I now return to my own expedition. I rowed twenty odd miles this first spell, and found I should be able to stand it perfectly well. About an hour after night I put up at a miserable cabin, fifty-two miles from Pittsburg, where I slept on what I supposed to be corn-stalks, or something worse; so preferring the smooth bosom of the Ohio to this brush heap, I got up long before day, and, being under no apprehension of losing my way, I again pushed out into the stream. The landscape on each side lay in one mass of shade, but the grandeur of the projecting headlands and vanishing points, or lines, was charmingly reflected in the smooth glassy surface below. I could only discover when I was passing a clearing, by the crowing of cocks; and now and then, in more solitary places, the big-horned owl made a most hideous hollowing, that echoed among the mountains. In this lonesome manner, with full leisure for observation and reflection, exposed to hardships all day, and hard berths all night, to storms of rain, hail and snow, for it froze severely almost every night, I persevered from the 24th of February to Sunday

evening, March 17th, when I moored my skiff safely in Bear-Grass Creek, at the rapids of the Ohio, after a voyage of seven hundred and twenty miles. My hands suffered the most; and it will be some weeks yet before they recover their former feeling and flexibility."

Steubenville, Charlestown and Wheeling, where he stopped to visit friends, broke for a while the hardships of his voyage. At Marietta he met the son of General Israel Putnam, and later he viewed Blennerhassett's Island by the light of burning brush. At last the weather became so severe, since it was snowing hard, that he landed on the Kentucky shore and made his way to a cabin near at hand, where he was entertained with stories of bear-treeing, wolf-trapping and wild-cat hunting by the old hunter, while "all night long the howling of wolves kept the dogs in a perpetual uproar of barking." As he went on down the river in his boat, he turned aside frequently to examine rocks or to inquire about fossils; he was always eager for anything interesting to the scientist. It was a welcome sight to him when he, in the midst of a raging storm, saw at last the houses of Cincinnati, which he declared the "neatest and handsomest situated place" with which he had met since leaving Philadelphia. Nevertheless, soon he was in the *Ornithologist* again, and on the very first afternoon he rowed twenty miles before he rested. The weather was bad, it was raining hard, and his "great-coat" was used to cover his bird-skins, so that all which he had to protect himself with against the cold was a bottle of wine that he soon emptied, drinking the

healths of his friends. When he landed near Louisville in the night, he had to grope his way up to the town through a miry swamp. The next day he sold his skiff for just half what he had paid for it to a man who wondered why he had given it such a "droll Indian name" as the "Ornithologist." With that diligence which only a scientist knows, he traversed all the country around, sometimes with his book under his arm, sometimes with both book and gun, but more often it was with the gun alone that he went, seeking specimens of unusual or familiar birds.

At Cincinnati he had met with poor success; the people told him they would "think about it" when he asked them to subscribe. "They are," he says, "a very thoughtful people." At Louisville his reception was no warmer. In his whole trip through Kentucky he secured only fifteen subscribers, for the country was new and had little time to spare on works of science or of leisure.

It was in Louisville that there occurred the famous first meeting between Wilson and the afterward distinguished John James Audubon, who was then engaged in business in that city. Audubon gave this account of their meeting, which took place in March, 1810:

"One fair morning I was surprised by the entrance into our counting-room of Mr. Alexander Wilson, the celebrated author of the 'American Ornithology,' of whose existence I had never, until that moment, been apprized. This happened in 1810. \* \* \* He, however, proceeded immediately to disclose the object of his visit, which was

to procure subscriptions for his work. He opened his books, explained the nature of his occupations, and requested my patronage.

"I felt surprised and gratified at the sight of his volumes, turned over a few of the plates, and had already taken a pen to write my name in his favour, when my partner rather abruptly said to me in French: "My dear Audubon, what induces you to subscribe to the work? Your drawings are certainly far better; and again, you must know as much of the habits of American birds as this gentleman.' Whether Mr. Wilson understood French or not, or if the suddenness with which I paused disappointed him, I cannot tell; but I clearly perceived that he was not pleased. Vanity and the encomium of my friend prevented me from subscribing. Mr. Wilson asked me if I had any drawings of birds. I arose, took down a large folio, laid it on the table and showed him the whole of the contents. His surprise appeared great, as he told me that he never had the most distant idea that any other individual than himself had been engaged in the forming of such a collection. He asked me if it was my intention to publish, and when I answered in the negative, his surprise seemed to increase. And, truly, such was not my intention; for until long after, when I met the Prince of Musignano, in Philadelphia, I had not the least idea of presenting the fruits of my labor to the world? Mr. Wilson next examined my drawings with care, asked if I should have any objections to lend him a few during his stay; to which I replied that I had none. He then bade me good morning, not, however, until I had

made an arrangement to explore the woods in the vicinity along with him, and had promised to procure him some birds of which I had drawings in my collection, but which he had never seen.

"It happened that he lodged at the same house with us (at Louisville), but his retired habits, I thought, exhibited either a strong feeling of discontent, or a decided melancholy. The Scotch airs, which he played sweetly on his flute, made me melancholy too, and I felt for him. Seeing that he was all enthusiasm, I exerted myself as much as was in my power to procure for him the specimens which he wanted. We hunted together and obtained birds which he had never before seen; but, Reader, I did not subscribe to his work, for even at that time my collection was larger than his. \* \* \* Before many days elapsed, he left Louisville on his way to New Orleans, little knowing how much his talents were appreciated in our small town, at least by myself and my friends."

Wilson's own diary has the following entries concerning his stay in Louisville: "March 19—Rambled round the town with my gun. Examined Mr. Audubon's drawings in crayons. Very good. Saw two new birds he had—both *Matacillæ*." "March 21 Went out this afternoon with Mr. A. Saw a number of Sandhill Cranes. Pigeons numerous." "March 23—Packed my things which I left in care of a merchant here to be sent on to Lexington; and having parted, with great regret with my paroquet to the gentleman of the tavern, I bade adieu to Louisville, to which place I had four letters of introduction, and was taught to expect much of

everything there; but never received one act of courtesy from those to whom I was recommended, one subscriber, nor one new bird; though I delivered my letters, ransacked the woods repeatedly, and visited all the characters likely to subscribe."


The words of the two men are in part contradictory. Which are we to believe? Robert Buchanan, who was commissioned by Mrs. Audubon to write her husband's life, says, "We must take Audubon's account *cum grano salis*." On the other hand, the poet-naturalist, John Burroughs,\* takes Audubon's side in the matter. "Wilson," he writes, "was of a nature far less open and generous than was Audubon. It is evident that he looked upon the latter as his rival and was jealous of his superior talents; for superior they were in many ways." We doubt if Mr. Burroughs would hold to the charge he has made here against Wilson, on more careful consideration. In case after case Mr. Burroughs himself cautions his readers that certain statements of Audubon's must, to use Buchanan's expression, be taken "*cum grano salis*." In speaking of one story he even suggests that it is made "out of the whole cloth" by Audubon and never occurred at all. If this be the case, why should we accept Audubon's word in preference to Wilson's, with whom accuracy and honesty were notable characteristics? Mr. Burroughs also bears witness that Wilson was Audubon's "equal, if not his superior" in accuracy of observation.

It is to be remembered, too, that Wilson's diary was written at the time and sent in a letter to a

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\* John James Audubon by John Burroughs.

friend—who apparently did not even know Audubon—without the slightest idea of its ever being published, while Audubon's account was written after Wilson's death, after he had seen Wilson's diary, and was in defense of his own action at the time. Appearances are certainly in favor of Wilson. Moreover, why should Wilson have been jealous of Audubon, or have regarded him as a rival, when he had Audubon's own assurance that he did not intend publication, whereas the second volume of Wilson's work was already in the press? On the other hand, that Audubon did regard Wilson as a rival was evidenced later. When three new editions of the "Ornithology" were to be published in Edinburgh, Audubon heard of it and very naturally "set to work vigorously to get his book out before them." Audubon evidently felt great interest in Wilson after his death and took him for his guide. At a Buffalo hotel he wrote after his name, "Who, like Wilson, will ramble, but never, like that great man, die under the lash of a bookseller." When traveling in Great Britain through York, Leeds, and other places, he remarked, "How often I thought during these visits of poor Alexander Wilson." Words of praise for a dead man are cheap; deeds of kindness to a live one cost more. When Alexander Wilson was traveling under every hardship, giving his life for science, Audubon, then a well-to-do business man, let his paltry vanity restrain his first impulse to help him; Wilson understood his action and his sensitive nature was hurt. This is the whole matter, and with all of Audubon's greatness and all his achievements,





credit should be given where credit is due, and Wilson will be cleared from the imputation of littleness and falsehood.

After leaving Louisville Wilson passed on through Shelbyville and Frankfort to Lexington, where he spent some most pleasant days. He was introduced among the substantial people of the place and was charmed with the ladies that he met. The town itself he criticised severely, but prophesied that all its faults would be corrected by time, and declared the place a "monument of the enterprise, courage and industry of its inhabitants." On his way from Lexington to Nashville (about thirteen miles from the latter place) he met with the rare case of a landlord who refused to accept pay for his lodgings. This hospitable man, of the good name of Isaac Walton, declared that since Wilson was traveling for the good of the world he should pay nothing whenever he stopped at his place. Blessed be his honorable memory!

At Nashville Wilson wrote so interesting a letter to his fiancée, Miss Sarah Miller, that it is worthy of being quoted in full. It reveals the restraint which Wilson held upon himself as a lover, as well as the fact that he was among the earliest of abolitionists in sympathies. It is well to bear in mind in reading any of Wilson's letters, however, that he was always too apt to judge a whole people by the few examples that he might meet with. He was, though, perfectly impartial in his criticisms. New England, Georgia, Virginia, Kentucky, New Jersey, the legislature of his own State, all come almost equally under the stroke of his lash. Wherever he

thinks he sees an evil he bitterly denounces it in writing to his friends. His letter reads:

"Nashville, May 1, 1810.

"To Miss Sarah Miller:

"My Dear Friend, Nine hundred miles distant from you sits Wilson, the hunter of birds' nests and sparrows, just preparing to enter on a wilderness of 780 miles—most of it in the territory of Indians—*alone* but in good spirits, and expecting to have every pocket crammed with skins of new and extraordinary birds before he reach the City of New Orleans. I dare say you have long ago accused me of cruel forgetfulness in not writing as I promised, but that, I assure you, was not the cause. To have forgot my friends in the midst of strangers, and to have forgot *you* of all others, would have been impossible. But I still waited until I should have something very interesting to amuse you with, and am obliged at last to take up the pen without having anything remarkable to tell you of. Yet I don't know but a description of the fashions of Kentucky or Paris. What would you think of a blanket riding dress, a straw side-saddle, and a large mule with ears so long that they might almost serve for would be almost as entertaining as that of London reins? I have seen many such fashionable figures in Kentucky. Or, what think you of a beau who had neither been washed nor shaved for a month, with three yards of coarse blue cloth wrapped around his legs by way of boots, a ragged great-coat, without coat, jacket or neckcloth, and breathing the rich perfume of corn whiskey? Such fig-

ures are quite fashionable in Kentucky. This is a charming country for ladies. From the time they are first able to handle a cow skin, there is no amusement they are so fond of as flogging their negroes and negro wenches. This they do with so much coolness and seeming satisfaction, that it really gives them an air of great dignity and manliness. The landlady of the tavern where I lodge is a great connoisseur at this sort of play; and while others apply their cow skins only to the back, she has discovered that the shins, elbows and knuckles are far more sensitive, and produce more agonizing screams and greater convulsions in the 'black devils,' as she calls them, than any other place. My heart sickens at such barbarous scenes, and, to amuse you, I will change to some more agreeable subject.

"In passing from Lexington to Nashville—a distance of 200 miles—I overtook on the road a man mending his stirrup-leathers, who walked around my horse several times and observed that I seemed to be armed. I told him I was well armed with gun and pistols, but I hoped he was not afraid to travel with me on that account, as I should be better able to assist in defending him as well as myself, if attacked. After understanding the nature of my business, he consented to go on with me, and this man furnished me with as much amusement as Strap did Roderick Random. He was a most zealous Methodist, and sung hymns the first day almost perpetually. Finding that I should be obliged to bear with this, I got him to try some of them to good old song tunes, and I then joined with him, as

we rode along, with great piety. I found one in his book that very nearly answered to Jones' song of the 'Vicar and Moses,' and that soon became a favourite air with us. He labored with so much earnestness to make me a convert—preaching sometimes with great vehemence—that I had no other resource on such occasions but to ride hard down hill, which, the preacher being unable to do, generally broke the thread of his discourse. He was, however, very useful to me in taking charge of my horse while I went into the woods after strange birds, and got so attached to me that he waited two days for me in a place where I had some drawings to make. I stopped five days in the barrens of Kentucky, exploring that extraordinary country, in the house of a good Presbyterian, who charged me nothing, and would have kept me for a month for some lessons in drawing which I gave his two daughters. Here my psalm-singing Methodist left me. These barrens are almost without wood, and the whole face of the ground seemed to be covered with blossomed strawberries. They must grow in immense quantities here in the proper season. Great numbers of beautiful flowers that I have never seen before were seen in every direction, some of them extremely elegant. Many of the inhabitants keep their milk in caves 100 feet below the surface of the ground, and these caves extend so far under ground that they have never ventured to their extremities. Frightful stories are told of some tavern-keepers, who are suspected of destroying travelers and secreting their bodies in these caves. If I were not afraid of giving you

the horrors, I would relate an adventure I had in one of the most frightful of these caves with the fellow to whom it belongs, and who is strongly suspected of being a murderer, even by his neighbours. The town I am now in is the capital of the State of Tennessee, and is built on the top of a rocky mountain above the Cumberland river, which is about as large as the Schuylkill, but much deeper. The people are now planting in their cotton fields, and it is curious to see the seeds lying like rags of tattered cotton along in the trenches. Apropos of rags, I have been obliged to throw a good many of mine overboard since I purchased a horse. My handkerchiefs are reduced to three, and other articles in proportion. By the time I reach New Orleans, I expect to carry all the remainder on my back. My parakeet is my faithful companion yet, and I shall try hard to bring him home with me. He creeps into my pocket when I ride, and when I alight he comes out to amuse the people where I stop.

"Please present my respectful compliments to your mother and father, and don't be offended at anything I have said. If I hear or see any ghosts or hobgoblins between this and Natchez, or anything worth telling, you may depend on hearing from me.

Compliments to sister Jones &c., &c., and believe me to be, yours affectionately,

"ALEX WILSON"

wildest of countries to Natchez, passing on his  
From Nashville Wilson traveled through the

way the grave of his old friend, Governor Meriweather Lewis of the Lewis-Clark Expedition. The mystery of this distinguished man's death has never been explained, there being many circumstances which point to the probability of his having been killed and robbed by the man Grinder, at whose cabin he was stopping for the night. Wilson, however, does not mention this rumor, but seems to have accepted without hesitation the very improbable story of suicide which Mrs. Grinder herself related to him. To show his respect for his dead friend, Wilson not only wrote verses to Lewis's memory, but he also gave Grinder money, out of his own scanty store, to have the grave enclosed.

After reaching Natchez and searching throughout the surrounding country for subscribers and new birds, Wilson traveled on through west Florida, New Orleans, east Florida, and many of the islands near the coast. On September 2, 1810, he again reached Philadelphia after having been traveling, sometimes in a boat, sometimes on horseback, but chiefly on foot, for seven continuous months.

While at Nashville our traveler met with a misfortune which he accepted and remedied with that dauntless spirit which had marked his whole life. He somewhat carelessly intrusted the drawings which he had made since leaving home to the mail, and they never reached their destination. The loss was of similar nature to that which Audubon suffered in the destruction by mice of a

large number of his colored sheets, but Wilson's was fortunately nothing like so great.

After his return from this trip through the inland to Florida, Wilson set vigorously to work preparing for the press the material which he had collected. The year 1811 and the earlier part of 1812 was spent in Philadelphia, where he stayed a great part of the time at the beautiful flower-embowered home of William Bartram. Busy as he was, he found time occasionally to write to Scotland and to send some part of his little income to his old father. Misfortunes seem to have been gathering across the water. Wilson wrote his brother David that his wish to "reach the glorious rock of independence" in order that from thence he might assist his "relatives who are struggling with and buffeting the billows of adversity" had led him on to his prodigious exertions. Later in the same year David joined him in America, bringing tidings of the loved ones and of their misfortunes, and Wilson took him with him to live.

The third volume of the "Ornithology" appeared in the early part of 1811, and on July 9 of the same year Wilson wrote George Ord that the fourth volume was all finished, save the engraving of two plates. It appeared a little later. The fifth and sixth volumes came from the press in 1812, and in the early part of the following year the seventh was published.

Late in 1812 he made his last ornithological trip. This voyage led him up the Hudson, across the rough, rugged country to Lake Champlain,

which he followed until he reached Burlington, Vermont; all the while he was adding copiously to his collection of birds. The country about the Connecticut River he tramped, gun in hand, visited again Dartmouth College and Boston, and passed through Portsmouth and Portland. At Haverhill his unusual habits of tramping the forests alone caused him to be arrested and imprisoned as a Canadian spy, but on explanation he was soon released. His second visit to New England was rich in results, and greatly encouraged he was soon at work again in Philadelphia. Here all was not going well, for in spite of the generous praise and thanks that he gave to all his co-workers, in his prefaces, especially the engravers, Lawson, Murray, and Warnicke, some of them occasioned him no little trouble. Murray, he could no longer depend on, and all of his "colourists" left him, so that he had to do a great deal of extra work, and at this period his health was beginning to fail. At the same time, however, fortune was not altogether frowning on him. His books were beginning to bring him some fame, and he was elected a member of the Columbia Society of Fine Arts and of the Philosophical Society of Philadelphia.

By the early part of July the eighth volume of the "Ornithology" was ready for the press, and Wilson was eagerly planning the last one, and outlining a work on American quadrupeds similar to the "Ornithology." But already the strain of his work was telling upon him, and his constitution began to weaken under it, yet like a true war-



horse, he was to die "in harness." While talking with a friend he saw a bird of a species which he especially desired to secure. He followed it across a river and finally obtained it, but only after he had become drenched with water. The cold which resulted from this chase brought on dysentery, a disease from which he had before suffered a great deal, and which in his weakened condition he was unable to withstand. He died after only a few days' sickness at nine in the morning on the 23rd of August, 1813, in his 48th year. All the scientific men and clergy of Philadelphia united in paying their last respects to his memory, when he was buried in the yard of the Swedish Church on Water street, Philadelphia. A marble table-tomb above his grave bears for inscription:

THIS MONUMENT  
covers the remains of  
ALEXANDER WILSON,  
Author of the  
American Ornithology.  
He was born in Renfrewshire, Scotland,  
on the 6th. July, 1766:  
Emigrated to the United States  
in the year 1794;  
*Aged 47.*  
On the 23rd. August, 1813,  
of the dysentery,  
And died in Philadelphia,  
*Ingeno stat sine morte decus.*

At the time of his death Wilson is said to have been engaged to Miss Sarah Miller, "daughter of a proprietor in the vicinity of Winterton." He appointed her an executrix of his estate.

The eighth volume of the "Ornithology," which

was already in the press, was committed to the care of his friend, George Ord, who had been with Wilson on some of his expeditions. It appeared in January, 1814, and was followed in May by the last volume, which Ord also edited and to which he appended a life of Wilson. Ord wrote, partly from Wilson's notes, the accompanying text to the ninth volume, but the plates had been colored under Wilson's own superintendence.

With a touch of the all-pervading sentiment which his somewhat taciturn Scotch nature often restrained him from expressing, Wilson had often given utterance to the wish that his grave might be where the birds would sing above him, and it was a cause of much regret, after this became known to his friends, that in the yard of the Swedish Church the wish seemed unfulfilled. Alexander B. Grosart, however, tells us that "Although the Swedish Church is in a business-crowded district, I myself, on paying a pilgrim-visit to the grave, heard an oriole piping softly and sweetly within a few yards of it." Over the tomb of Wilson there is now growing a graceful young willow, and in that far-away part of the city about Water street there is not much noise to disturb the quiet peace of the little grave-yard, which lies before the quaint old Swedes' Church.

Wilson's life had been one of fierce strivings and bitter disappointments, and it ended in the midst of struggle. Not the faintest touch of sorridness had stained it; but the forces which most went to shape it were love of science and of his

country and the alluring thirst for fame. If ambition be a sin, then he had sinned deeply, for in company with great men and with angels he was possessed of this "last infirmity of noble minds." We shall hardly blame him for this, for though there is an ambition of avarice and pride there is also an ambition of love and service. Even as it should be, the battles of his brave life ended in victory, and if he received not the palm in life, it was at least laid in death upon his tomb, and it was this after all that he most desired: that he might accomplish something by which posterity might know that he had lived. A pæan of praise and commendation of his work went up after his death; his "Ornithology" carried his fame over Europe and everywhere was hailed as a great achievement. The *Edinburgh Review* commented on it with what for that staid publication may be called enthusiasm; the *North American Review* copied this notice; and article after article appeared in other magazines. In his own town of Paisley the house which had replaced his birth-place was marked with a memorial slab and a monument was erected to his honor.

What Wilson's final rank as a scientist shall be, must be left for the scientific world to decide, but it is safe to say it will be no insignificant one. Excluding the little work which William Bartram and Thomas Jefferson had done in ornithology, Wilson was the pioneer worker among the American birds. Prince Charles Lucian Bonaparte, who corrected some of Wilson's mistakes of nomenclature, declared that it was a most extra-

ordinary service which Wilson performed for science in presenting among the two hundred and seventy-eight species of birds which he had described, forty-eight entirely new ones. Ord was of the opinion that the "Ornithology" presented fifty-six\* which had been hitherto undescribed.

Perhaps it is safe to say that Wilson's place as the greatest American Ornithologist is disputed only by Audubon, and how vastly different were their advantages! Audubon worked when one might travel with comparative facility, and he not only had the assistance which was to be gained from Wilson's work itself, but he also entered into the fruits of Wilson's labors to awaken interest in ornithology. With all the advantages of education also, which an indulgent and thrifty father could offer him, among which was the time spent under the French artist, David, he had everything to help him surpass in his ultimate achievements the work of the poverty-shackled and self-educated Scotchman. Had Wilson's forty-eight years been stretched to Audubon's seventy-six, through the days of prosperity and approbation which his books would have brought him, the result of his labors might have been ten-fold greater. John Burroughs in his life of Audubon compares him thus with Wilson: "His drawings have far more spirit and artistic excellence, and his text shows more enthusiasm and hearty affiliation with nature. In accuracy of observation Wilson is fully his equal if not his superior." Of

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\* Mr. John Burroughs accepts the original figures also, viz, three hundred and twenty species described, of which fifty-six were new.

Audubon he says, "His birds are very demonstrative, even theatrical and melodramatic at times. \* \* Wilson errs, if at all, in the other direction. His birds, on the other hand, reflect his cautious, undemonstrative Scotch nature." The comparison is not, after all, a very severe one for Wilson's fame.

## CHAPTER VII

### WILSON, THE MAN

He who would enter into the spirit of any man's work must first understand something of the man. One should know his Boswell if he would enjoy to the fullest his Johnson; Charles Lamb and "Old Fitz" are as delightful in themselves as in the "Essays of Elia" or the *Rubáiyát* of Omar. Even the frailties of a Bacon or a Byron must be remembered for the light that we gain for the understanding of what they have written. Indeed, for myself I must confess that there are some men who mean more to me than their books. With all my love for the *Defense of Poesy* and the *Arcadia*, I would sooner throw the last existing copies of them both into the fire than have the world forget that Sir Philip Sidney had lived; and the personalities of Phillips Brooks and William Gilmore Simms hold a dearer place in my own heart than any printed pages that survive them. Even the records of some men's faces mean a great deal to us. Who does not love the kindly smile of Emerson or the dreamy eyes of Hawthorne? What lover of literature is there who does not con over the features of his favorite author as he would over those of a dear friend? We shall lose none of our admiration for our Alexander Wilson if we will introduce him to ourselves, for his life is as full of courage, of heroic strivings, of lofty aspirations, of patriotism and of love as it could

well be, and as full of the freshness, the fragrance, and the freedom of the woods as are his own writings. But his nature was so characterized by growth and development that we must study him at least in two periods of his life.

The picture that was painted of him a few years before he came to America by James Crow is said to be an excellent reproduction of his youthful appearance. His face is exceedingly narrow, and about the large dark eyes there is not the keen expression which was noticed by some who have described his appearance later in life, but rather the wistfulness of the dreamer, looking far beyond him with heavy drooping lids. His high but somewhat narrow forehead is lost in a profusion of straight-cut hair that falls over it; his nose is long and thin and noticeably hooked, while above his narrow but rounding chin is a well-bowed sensitive mouth with low-hanging underlip. About his shoulders falls his hair in long natural waves, and the hand on which he rests his face is a slender and graceful one for a man who has earned his bread with such hard labor. Withal, his long thin face, with its dreamy, almost melancholy expression, is not uncomely, though certainly not handsome. It is the face rather of the poet than of the man of action, and would scarcely lead us to expect the dauntless pertinacity of purpose which at last made him famous; nor in the sweet, almost sentimental, features can we catch the faintest glimpse of the vein of coarseness which runs through his earlier poems.

In considering Wilson's nature we must not for-

get one predominating characteristic of his earlier years—moodiness. One moment he is exulting over some little encouragement—a kind word from some one he highly esteemed, or a few more names on his subscription list, the next he is plunged in the “slough of despondency” by the smallest slight imaginable. His whole world glows in rose colors or darkens in gloom according to his feelings—to use his own words, “the least beam of hope brightens and the slightest shades horrify his tumultuous soul.” From his earliest youth Wilson’s propensity for rhyming kept hold upon him, and his abiding propensity for rhyming kept him from devoting himself to his other labors with that ardor which is the price of success. Even in this early period of his life he was not wanting in patient industry. How very assiduously did he tramp the rough Scotch roads, going from door to door, studying with all earnestness in what manner he might please this one and flatter that one until he had cajoled them into subscribing for his book; poverty often oppressed him, but such times did not come when he devoted his energies to the loom, but only when he heeded the Siren-voice of his treacherous muse, which so often led him astray. He was proud of the little he had accomplished in a poetic way, and vain of his poetic talents. A little praise fired him with tumultuous enthusiasm and turned his thoughts from the earning of bread to the winning of fame. A character naturally brave, almost to recklessness, encouraged him to leave a good and sure living to take up a most precarious one if only it



brought devotion to his beloved poetry and the chance of a reputation. But we cannot blame such fearlessness when we remember that it was this also that sent him across the Atlantic and at last led him, by a new path, to the goal for which he so ardently longed. There were other causes, too, which united with this thirst for fame to lead him Galahad-like upon his two searches for his "holy-grail." There seemed to have been born in him a love for roving and a devotion to nature and animals which was at last to master and control all other passions of his life. Through all his wanderings—were he gloomy or glad—never did he forget to listen to the songs of the birds, nor was he ever too sordid or weary to turn from his trail to view the beauties of nature; to him life without the birds, the flowers, and the glorious heavens wasn't really life after all. In his earliest writings there is an honest candor, a love of truth and fair dealing, and a hatred of artificiality and falsehood that are unmistakably real and sincere. Save in his darkest hours of despondency when nothing looked bright to him, he saw life with wide-open, far-seeing eyes that looked at everything in a broad, wholesome way.

Toward his brother poets, as in later life to his fellow naturalists, there is never, even in his most confidential letters, the least tinge of envy, but his nature is in this respect as free and open as the blue sky above his beloved American fields. Yet his character has not received the refining of suffering and experience that is to come to it with the passing years. He is a little over self-

conscious, a fault common to introspective natures such as his—sometimes a little of bitterness creeps into his writings; those who will not listen to his proposals are dubbed narrow fools, while he pours out his wrath on the rich who keep dogs to frighten off the poor peddlers; often there is a biting bit of satire or sarcasm flashing out with unexpected sharpness. How heartless is his description of a "little hunch-backed dominie" who refused to take the book which he had subscribed for, though at his earlier visit he had been exceedingly agreeable to him. He likened him to a walking-stick with a head fixed between two huge eminences, "one jutting out before, the other heaped up behind like a mountain." His eyes, he says, "rolled forever with a kind of jealous pride and self-importance, on all around him." In his later years he could never have brought himself to speak those parting words when he told him that nature was especially unkind in giving to one man so crazy a body with such an insignificant soul; but on the other hand he avows his belief in the goodness of the Duchess of Buccleugh, even after that lady gave him so curt an answer at the "Fair of Dalkeith."

Wilson's sensitiveness is again and again evident; for instance, after the affair with the Duchess he relates how with hurt and despondent feelings he left his wares to retire to a corner of the room and ponder over his fresh disappointment.

To his friends and relatives Wilson was unfailingly kind, thoughtful, and faithful. Thomas Crichton, David Brodie, William Duncan, his

nephew, and his father and step-mother were never forgotten throughout his whole life, and in later years he was equally devoted to Charles Orr and William Bartram. Once admiring President Jefferson, he never faltered in his devotion to him, even when he failed to get the appointment on Pike's Expedition, for which he so much longed for the sake of his study of the birds of that unknown region.

Wilson's character was marked by a natural gentleness and naive tenderness. Since his mother died when he was a child, and he never knew the affection of a wife, while his sister was several years his senior,—nor was he associated with her for any long while,—he was thus without those more subtle sympathies which are only developed by the affections of a woman made dear by life's closer ties. Yet to Wilson the love of animals appealed with a force that few men know, and to bird and beast alike throughout life his affection went out with all the tenderness of his nature.

A little paroquet which he carried with him through one of his southern trips became to him a real companion, and he speaks of his regret at parting from it with evident, though restrained, feeling. His account of the freeing of a wee mouse, which he was sketching, speaks volumes for the tenderness of the man. "One of my boys," he wrote Bartram, "caught a mouse in school, a few days ago, and directly marched up to me with his prisoner. I set about drawing it that same evening, and all the while the pantings

of its little heart showed it to be in the most extreme agonies of fear. I had intended to kill it, in order to fix it in the claws of a stuffed owl, but happening to spill a few drops of water near where it was tied, it lapped it up with such eagerness and looked in my face with such an eye of supplicating terror, as perfectly overcame me. I immediately untied it, and returned it to life and liberty. \* \* \* Insignificant as the object was, I felt at that moment the sweet sensations that mercy leaves on the mind when she triumphs over cruelty." Though this occurred in his later years it is characteristic of the humaneness of his whole life.

Let us turn now from the young Scotchman to the mature American. We shall find that though time has plowed deep furrows in the face and in the soul of the man, yet this has only made the flowers—the virtues of his character—blossom more beautifully.

Faithful as he ever was to his own ideals of life, yet the Wilson that died at the age of forty-seven, in Philadelphia, was in many ways different from the young man of twenty-eight who disembarked from the *Swift* in 1794. Not only had he schooled himself with rigorous constancy in those studies in which he was conscious of being most deficient, but life itself with its hardships and experiences had disciplined him in many things. We have remarked on a strain of coarseness in his early Scotch writings which was characteristic of many of the writers with whom he was familiar; not a line that he wrote in America but is as pure and

chaste as a child's thoughts. The rash impetuosity which had led him into trouble in Paisley appeared no more, but when his brother David brought with him to America the poems which were the occasion of the imprisonment in Scotland, Wilson is said to have given them to the flames.

To Crichton he wrote in 1811, "You found me in early life an enthusiastic young man, pursuing what I thought right, without waiting to consider its expediency, and frequently suffering (and that feelingly too) for my temerity. At present I have the same ardor in the pursuit of my object, but the object is selected with more discretion." His consciousness of the change in himself is often voiced in his letters; the August before his death he wrote to his father, "The difficulties and hardships I have encountered in life have been useful to me. In youth I had wrong ideas of life. Imagination too often led judgment astray. You would find me much altered from the son you knew me in Paisley—more diffident of myself, and less precipitate, though often wrong."

He had great confidence in the possibilities of honest, unremitting work, and a shrewd understanding of the ways of men. His whole philosophy of life is summed up in his remark that, "To be completely master of one's business, and ever anxious to discharge it with fidelity and honor, is to be great, beloved, respected and happy." With his canny Scotch nature he had little respect for good-natured negligence, but believed that it was a man's duty to look out for

his own interest. To William Duncan he wrote, "More than half of the roguery of one-half of mankind is owing to the simplicity of the other half." He distinguished clearly between the love of church and the love of religion, "pietism" and goodness; he was liberal in his views, but deeply and sincerely religious in his feelings. Of his patriotism we have already spoken. His love for his native country and the still greater devotion to the land of his adoption are expressed over and over again in his writings. "Few Americans," he wrote to a friend in Scotland, "have seen more of their country than I have done, and none love it better." George Ord, who knew him well, summed up his character thus: "Mr. Wilson was possessed of the nicest sense of honour in all his dealings, he was not only scrupulously just but highly generous. His veneration for truth was exemplary. His disposition was social and affectionate. His benevolence was extensive. He was remarkably temperate in eating and drinking; his love for retirement preserving him from the contaminating influence of the convivial circle. But, as no one is perfect, Mr. Wilson partook, in a small degree, of the weakness of humanity. He was of the *genus irritabile* and was obstinate in opinion. It ever gave him pleasure to acknowledge error, when the conviction resulted from his own judgment alone; but he could not endure to be told of his mistakes. Hence his associates had to be sparing of their criticisms, through fear of forfeiting his friendship. With almost all his friends, he had occasionally, arising from some

collision of opinion, some slight misunderstanding, which was soon passed over, leaving no disagreeable impression. But an act of disrespect, or wilful injury, he would seldom forgive."\* In short, Wilson was a proud, independent, active, generous, ambitious man, with the frailties and virtues which usually accompany a restrained but fiery spirit. We have described Wilson's appearance as a young man, it remains now to paint the picture of him as he looked in his later years in America. His height was about five feet ten, but from his stooping somewhat he appeared less. Audubon thus recites his recollection of his first sight of him: "His long, rather hooked nose, the keenness of his eyes, and his prominent cheek-bones, stamped his countenance with a peculiar character. The dress, too, was of a kind not usually seen in that part of the country; a short coat, trousers and a waistcoat of grey cloth." There is an excellent portrait of Wilson by Peale which was presented by Governor S. Bradford to Dr. N. Chapman and by him presented to the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia.†

Since Ord's description must represent him as he was in his very latest years, with it we close our portrayal of Wilson, the Man.

"In his person he was of middle stature, of a thin habit of body; his cheek bones projected, and his eyes, though hollow, displayed considerable vivacity and intelligence; his complexion was sallow, his mien thoughtful; his features were

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\* "American Ornithology," IX.

† Through the kindness of this society we are able to use a copy of this portrait as our frontispiece.

coarse, and there was a dash of vulgarity in his physiognomy, which struck the observer at the first view, but which failed to impress one on acquaintance. His walk was quick when traveling,—so much so that it was difficult for a companion to keep pace with him; but when in the forest in the pursuit of birds, he was deliberate and attentive—he was, as it were, all eyes and all ears.”



## CHAPTER VIII

### WILSON'S LITERARY WRITINGS

Like many another man whose fame was made by his prose works, Alexander Wilson began his literary life as a writer of verse. He will always be remembered as an author chiefly by his vigorous, idiomatic prose, which made such a fitting accompaniment to the faithful, lifelike drawings of his "American Ornithology." There was a vivacious picturesqueness about his descriptions, and a lightness of touch, which lifted them above mere scientific writings and established for them a claim to be considered as literature. He loved the birds which he studied, with the intense feeling of his strong Scotch nature, and when he made them the subject of his pen, whether in the realm of prose or of poetry, his enthusiasm carried him as though on the borrowed wings of his feathered friends to heights he could never reach when he wrote upon a different theme.

The "Ornithology" is written in a popular rather than a scientific style; indeed of Wilson it may be said that like Thoreau he was a poet-naturalist rather than a scientist. His birds are living creatures of the woods, not dried specimens from museums. Real descriptions of birds that he had actually known and watched are what he rejoiced in writing, not abstract generalizations from the facts and figures which he had collected. He gave these, too, but not with the same evident

delight. Read his account of the habits of the bluebird or his chapter on the red-headed woodpecker, and you cannot but delight in the fresh, naive manner in which he speaks of his friends of the forest.

Already has the "Ornithology" been treated of at so much length, however, that it is now enough simply to refer the reader to the pages of that charming book itself, with the assurance that for the most part it will be found anything else than dull to him who loves nature and her children.

Whatever else Wilson wrote in prose is of little interest save to students of his life. An oration which he delivered at Milestown on March 4, 1801, on "The Power and Value of National Liberty," indicates that Wilson possessed some oratorical ability. Both this and "The Solitary Philosopher," an essay published in *The Bee*, a Scottish magazine, in 1791, were of too ephemeral a nature to be especially interesting in themselves.

The Journal of his travels, and his personal letters, are all important for the gaining of a clear light on the life and character of the man, and to give a valuable insight into Scotch and American life a hundred years ago, but since he wrote them hurriedly during his travels we find in them no literary finish; they teem with the indications of the scantiness of his early education, which are not common in his more carefully corrected writings.

As a poet we wish to study him more fully. Wilson's prose is familiar to many readers, but with the exception of "The American Blue-bird" and "The Osprey," which have been often republished in anthologies, his verse is almost wholly unknown. It was a misfortune that he wrote so much verse, for the greater part of it is drearily prosaic, and the few pieces that are really good are like modest little poppies that have caught the bright colors of the sunlight and the freshness of the dewdrop, but are overlooked in the great field of dry stubble. How true this is may be grasped when we consider that there are over one hundred poems which are undeniably his, while a large number of others have been attributed to him. Nor are they for the most part short pieces, but many of them are of unusual length, the longest consisting of twenty-two hundred and nineteen lines. Of this great mass of verse not more than twenty pieces are of any real merit.

It is, therefore, only the claim that these few good poems can establish for him that shall give us any right to call him a poet at all. Before we take up the consideration of these, let us consider the whole great mass of his verse.

We shall find in Wilson all the faults of the Augustan age of English literature, of which in common with other poets of his time he was an immediate heir. Pope had died twenty-two years before he was born; the lives of Goldsmith and Gray barely overlapped into his own, but the poems of these men were still the models after which the lesser makers fashioned their stanzas;

it was after the mechanical smoothness of their verse that Wilson sought. This influence had a very enervating effect upon his measures, and it is only when he escaped from it that his verse rose above the commonplace.

Grosart in his edition of Wilson's poems gives in all one hundred and twenty-six pieces, of which four are of doubtful authorship, and three are only variant forms of other poems included in the same volume. The work readily falls into two groups, the poems written in Scotland and those composed during his later life in America. For convenience we may again divide the former of these groups by considering first the Scotch dialect pieces and secondly those in English.

Without doubt the finest bit of work that Wilson ever accomplished in his vernacular is the "Watty and Meg," which he published separately and without his name in 1792. There is a vigorous humor and a nice sense of the use of words evident in it as in nothing else that its author ever wrote. As a picture of the life which Wilson knew so well, it is beyond question true, and the very raciness of it adds to its faithfulness without making it actually coarse. It is the story of "the taming of the shrew" in humble Renfrewshire life, but its chief interest rests in the characters sketched and in the freshness of the telling, rather than in the slight incident which forms its plot. We see Watty as "he sat and smoket by himsel'" at the jovial hostelry of Mungo Blue, and we hear Meg as she comes in "like a Fury," threatening to throw his "whiskey i' the fire."

The vivid scene of the home-going, the scolding and the fright of Meg when her Watty pretends to have "'listed" in the army are realistic and are depicted in language that is expressive and picturesque. It was of this piece that an interesting story was told by Burns's widow to Dr. Robert Chambers. The poet was sitting at his desk by the window when he heard a local hawker crying out "Watty and Meg, a new ballad by Robert Burns." Burns thrust his head out of the open window and called out to the man, whom he knew, "That's a *lee*, Andy, but I would make your plack a bawbee if it were mine." There were not wanting at the time people who credited the poem to the greater poet, but in spite of its real merits it has not the imprint upon it of the genius of Burns.

Two years before "Watty and Meg" was printed Wilson had published his first volume of verse. The most notable thing which it contained was "The Disconsolate Wren," an early indication of its author's devotion to nature. The motto which is prefixed to it from the "Seasons" of James Thomson suggests a healthy influence which had come into his life from the poetry of this early nature poet. Simple as the poem is—its theme is only of a little wren whose nest had been destroyed—it is yet distinguished by several lines descriptive of nature that are almost matchless of their kind. "The morn," he says, "was keekin' frae the East," and the familiar picture takes on a new freshness from the quaintness of his phrasing.

"The circling nets ilk spider weaves  
Bent, wi' clear dew-drops hung,"

and the

"bonnie wee bit Wren,  
Lone on a fuggy stane,"

are instances of the same felicity in the use of more uncommon Scotch words.

Another poem which is an example of Wilson's skill at a different kind of verse is the "Epistle to Mr. William Mitchell," dated from "Lead-hills." Wilson was the author of several excellent verse letters that really contain lines of true poetry, but perhaps he never surpassed this one. Its opening lines,

"Hail! kind, free, honest-hearted swain,  
My ne'er forgotten frien';"

strike a chord of lightsome open-heartedness that runs through all eleven stanzas. He tells with an unruffled good-humor a homely story of a ram that butted his pack into the "burn," and the whole letter is as full of brightness as are the "wide muirs" of which it sings, "that spread wi' purple sweep,

"Beneath the sunny glowe."

There are two other epistles in the 1790 volume that are especially interesting. They are to Andrew Clark, an old friend, and Ebenezer Picken, one of Scotland's very minor poets. The first is full of characteristically strong phrases, and the other, though replete with references to the un-

familiar verses of Picken, is yet too genuinely Scotch and too full of individuality not to be noticed among his Scottish pieces.

There are a number of other epistles which are not especially noteworthy, because there is neither particular poetic beauty about them, nor yet any prominence of the individual note that might otherwise make them of interest. The two epistles to James Dobie are perhaps the best of these. The first gives a realistic picture of Wilson's attic, the second, were it not for its harrowing description of the filth of Edinburgh, would be one of the best of the epistles. The remainder of his Scotch verse-letters, which includes two others to William Mitchell, one to James Kennedy, and a second one to Andrew Clark, are in the main commonplace and uninteresting.

In the better of his epistles Wilson attained to a manner quite his own, although he used the stanza forms which were familiarly associated with the name of Robert Fergusson and which at the very time when he was writing in them were being consecrated by the genius of Robert Burns. Both Burns and Fergusson wrote their epistles in an easy, facile style that Wilson never gained, and their poetic genius gave to them the unmistakable stamp of beauty and freshness that was also beyond him. Nevertheless, there is merit in Wilson's epistles when they are considered apart from the work of these greater masters. He succeeded remarkably well in reproducing the atmosphere of the places which he described, and their bright, cheerful and aptly turned phrases are

not their only virtues, for frequently there are flashes of real poetry.

Of the other Scotch poems which were included in the 1790 volume a few words will suffice. "The Pack" is a dreary dialogue between a peddler and his pack, the former recounting his woes, the latter expostulating and reminding the other of what he has for which to be thankful. "Verses on Seeing Two Men Sawing Timber," "Rabby's Mistake," "Callamphithre's Elegy," the "Epitaph on Auld Jenet," and the "Address to the Ragged Specter, Poverty," are all equally trivial and worthless. The two elegies, one on the "Unfortunate Tailor," the other on the "Long Expected Death of a Wretched Miser," are coarse and without merit. The "Verses to a Stationer" are very poor, but the lines on "Daybreak" are full of suggestiveness in the pictures which are drawn of the awakening life of the city.

There were, besides the Scotch poems, fifty-one others in the first volume of Wilson's, written in English verse. They are, taken collectively, far inferior to the vernacular pieces, and it would be bootless to consider them all individually. It is more convenient to group them and consider the better pieces in each group. They consist of epistles, descriptive verses, fables, and songs chiefly. Those which are not included in these divisions we may speak of under the head of miscellaneous pieces.

The epistles have none of the distinction of individuality which marked several of those which he wrote in Scotch. Commonplace in thought



and mechanical in metre, they move smoothly on without disturbing the peace of our minds by a single striking phrase or fresh thought. From this generalization we except one only, the "Epistle to Mr. David Brodie, written on the Last Night of the Year." On so familiar a theme it would be difficult for a poet to be very original, and we do not find that this epistle surprises us by accomplishing anything very unusual. Yet the poem is a good one by reason of its very simplicity and sincerity and contains several stanzas that are quite worthy of Wilson at his best. The year is described as "It leaves us, trembling at the load it bears"; and an excellent description of the bare winter fields, which is strikingly concluded with the line "The bleak wind whistling o'er the drifted waste," gives a real poetic beauty to the poem.

The fables, which include "The Fly and the Leech," "The Monkey and Bee," and "The Wasp's Revenge," are manifestly copied after Fergusson, but they merely add volume without merit to the verse productions of Wilson. The songs are of a better quality. "Achtertool," "Matty," and "To Delia" are examples of the greater number of them. Smooth and mildly musical, there is nothing uncommon about them either of merit or of fault. They were written to familiar Scotch airs and were doubtless composed to be sung by Wilson and his friends around the festal board; no doubt they served the purpose well.

"The Group" is the one song to be especially noticed. It is a description of the revellers gath-

ered around the foaming bowl, and it has all the gay spirit of the occasion.

The originals of the six pictures which he sketched are somewhat doubtful, except the one of himself beginning

"Here Wilson and Poverty sits  
Perpetually boxing together."

So closely does he identify himself with poverty that a single verb answers for both. The song is interesting chiefly as throwing a strong light on those early days of his chequered life.

The descriptive pieces comprise a large number of character-sketches, stanzas on "Morning" and "Evening" and other similar subjects. They maintain a common level of mediocre verse, and there is not one among them that seems more deserving of particular attention than the rest. Nor shall we be greatly repaid by a study of the remaining pieces which do not come under the above groupings. Among these are several trivial elegies, a few pointless epigrams, some addresses of no great merit, and an unfinished poem on "Hardyknute."

The most, then, that we can claim for this first collection of poems which Wilson printed is that there were one or two pieces which gave mild promise of something better to come; it would have been far safer for his claims as a verse-writer if these early attempts of his youth had been allowed to slumber on forgotten. Wilson himself realized later the weakness of many of them, and when he published another edition in 1791 he

omitted several pieces that he had included in his first volume. Of the seven new pieces which he added to this collection, three are worthy of favorable notice. The longest of these is "The Laurel Disputed," which had already been separately printed. It is a monologue spoken in the person of an old countryman who maintains the superiority of Robert Fergusson over the older poet, Allan Ramsay. Wilson had delivered it in the Pantheon at Edinburgh, and though he alone spoke in Fergusson's favor against seven opponents he lost the vote of a large audience by only seventeen votes.\* "Eppie and the Deil" is another addition of merit. Both pieces are written in strong, racy Scotch dialect, and add much to the strength of the volume of verse. "Eppie and the Deil" with its very evident moral, is the story of an old woman who expressed the wish that the devil might take her loom. His Satanic majesty at once complied with her request, but so complacently did she accept the loss that the zest of the trick was quite gone and old "Cloods,"

"though he was the devil,  
For once he acted vera civil,"

and gave her back her wheel.

The third piece to be singled out for careful notice is a song. There is a rare swing, a musical lilt to the "Ode for the Birthday of our Immortal Scotch Poet" that is unusual among Wilson's

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\* Belfast Edition, 1844. It is claimed that the prize was won by bribery by Mr. Cumming, who is said to have purchased forty tickets of admission for his friends on condition that he should receive their votes.

verses. It has caught the wild, fearless spirit of the day, which laughs "down the priest and the devil by turns." It was set to music for Wilson by a local "Bacchanalian Club," and though we know nothing about the occasion for which it was written we may well believe that Burns himself was present when it was first sung. Nothing could better represent the daring expression of jubilant unrestraint which was characteristic of the younger men in Scotland at this period than this song which "mixes a damn" with "O rare Robin Burns."

Of the other four pieces which were added in the 1791 edition, one is an ode on "Despondence," closely modeled after Shenstone, another is an epigram, a third is a eulogistic address to a gentleman of local prominence, and the other is a very unsatisfactory attempt to put "Ossian's Lament" into rhyming iambic couplets.

Of the poem which was next published—"Watty and Meg"—we have already spoken, and we shall now mention an interesting group of verses, separately printed. These verses were born of the spirit of revolutionary unrest which was moving over the troubled waters of Scotch life, and though there is no poetry in any piece of the group, yet they are interesting as an expression of the feelings of the day. Only one of these verses, the "Address to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr," deals with political and religious matters, and bitterly and severely does it lash the existing conditions. The others, of which "The Shark," "Hab's Door," and the "Hol-

lander" are examples, are biting satires on the manufacturers, whom the weavers believed to be oppressing them. They are crude, relentless lampoons, and whether actually false or true, they show the heat and bitterness of the hatred which these weavers bore to their greedy employers. But they brought upon Wilson the wrath of the men against whom they were written, and it was partly due to them that his career in Scotland ended.

In 1791 there was printed in Paisley "The Psalm-singer's Assistant," by Robert Gilmour, and for it Wilson had furnished, at the request of his friend Thomas Crichton, seven hymns. The little song which is numbered fourth among these is rare for its quiet beauty and serenity.

Among the pieces of doubtful authorship attributed to Wilson we mention as worthy of note the "Spouter." It is mentioned in the "Paisley Repository" during Wilson's own lifetime among his poems, and the frequent references in it to other poems of his, as well as its general style, indicate that he is its author. It is an humorous account in Scotch of a rambling "Spouter" who recites and sings for the benefit of the audience that has gathered expecting to see a play of some sort. The piece is chiefly made up of recitations and songs of the "Spouter." The best of these are a pathetic little song "Young Jeannie," and a poem entitled "The Spirit of the Lake's Song," which is really a remarkable musical gem, suggesting—almost anticipating in theme—the "Cloud" of Shelley, though it had none of the

magic grace and wonderful melody of that exquisite lyric.

We now turn to the poems which were written after he crossed the Atlantic. In his earlier work Wilson had been most greatly influenced by Fergusson, Shenstone, Thomson, Goldsmith, and Pope. In a lesser degree Ramsay and the budding genius of Burns left their imprint upon his style. There is no doubt that Wilson knew something of the older Scottish poets, and the influence of the humble writers of verse among his own intimates may have affected him somewhat. Gay, Beattie, Smollett, and Gray were favorites with him, but there was little in their verse to exert a different influence upon him from what he also received from Pope or Goldsmith or Thomson. These masters of his he followed in these early years with slavish devotion; the result is that his early English pieces are but cold, commonplace copies of his models. He attained much of the smooth, mechanical ease of these poets, but none of their inspiration, and it was he who was perhaps least among them—Shenstone—that Wilson was most pleased to copy. When he wrote in his own Scotch tongue he was more original and Fergusson and Ramsay were as often mere incentives to his muse as they were models. So it was that his one very noteworthy poem which he produced in Scotland was the Scotch "Watty and Meg."

In America new conditions confronted him, and when he sang it was less often with a conscious sense of copying after another. The man-

ner of the day was his manner, and he had not sufficient poetic genius to completely break away from it; but it was composite rather than the style now of one poet, now another.

Ten years passed by with scarcely a poem written. In this period he composed a few exceedingly poor songs, such as "Bloomfield," "The Aristocrat's Warwhoop," and "My Landlady's Nose." That some of them were widely reprinted in the newspapers is a commentary on the taste of these editors rather than a proof of the merit of the pieces. "Jefferson and Liberty" is another song of this period. It is superior to the others and is interesting in the light of the relations of esteem and admiration which existed between Jefferson and the author; it also shows the ardent love of Wilson for his adopted land.

It was not until 1800, however, that Wilson really produced anything in America which was worth his while. This was the verse letter to Charles Orr. He did not publish this until it appeared greatly altered in the July issue of *The Literary Magazine and American Register*, under the name of "The Invitation." This poem was followed in the *Literary Magazine* by "A Rural Walk," "The Solitary Tutor," "Lines on Seeing a Portrait of Burns," and one or two others which are not worthy of comparison with those we have named. During this period he published separately his longest poem, "The Foresters," and in the "American Ornithology," he includes several of his best verses; these were "The American Blue-bird," "The Osprey," and "The King-bird."

"The Foresters" was Wilson's most pretentious poem; it was by no means his best. Its conscious attempt at the grandiose style would have quite spoiled it, had not the very nature of the poem been impracticable. It is a long, tiresome piece of twenty-two hundred and nineteen lines, with a subject no more exciting than a hunting expedition to Niagara Falls. Wilson himself expected great things of it, and declared to his nephew William Duncan that if it did not prove to be good he would despair of ever producing anything that would. Its success in book form, however, was poor, as it deserved to be. The attempt throughout the poem seems to be almost an endeavor to acquire the stately, splendid style of Milton, who is several times mentioned in the piece. But imagine a writer striving to engraft the grandeur of "Paradise Lost" on a poem written in rhyming heroic couplets, descriptive of a bird-hunting expedition! The greater portion of the poem is cumbersome and stiff, and at times the style reaches the extreme of bombast and bathos. There are lines of beauty, however, throughout the piece. A lovely picture of autumn begins with the forty-first line and at line twelve hundred and seventy-five there is a good passage representing an Indian's lament over his lost land. These few well-written passages here and there are unable to redeem the poem, however, for the larger part of it is a dreary waste of words.

The poem on Burns's portrait is in the main good, but its chief interest is biographical. It



has a significance as showing that the two poets were undoubtedly acquainted and that the poet-naturalist admired and loved ardently his "Brither Scot." There are manifest faults in the poem, but it tells us that to Wilson the subject was the "well-known Burns," his friend, whom he knew when though he was "his country's pride," he was "yet left dark Poverty's cold winds to brave."

We have come now to the consideration of a small group of nature poems on which we must at last base Wilson's fame as a poet. The first of these was "The Invitation." It is in the form of a verse letter from Wilson to Charles Orr and is descriptive of the inducements which the country offers to city-stifled workers. It is full of the beating pulse of blossoming summer, painting a land of almost oriental brilliancy. A rich coloring lights up the whole extent of its almost a century and a half of lines with the "green and gold and purple" hues of bird and flower. The little humming-bird "chirps his gratitude" as he hovers over the honeyed sweetness of the lines, flitting by the poet's art through the verse-garden. We see the "richest roses," as fanned by the ceaseless beating of his wings they "shrink from the splendour of his gorgeous breast"; we listen with the poet when he tells us how

"Sweet sings the thrush to morning and to me;"

we watch the king-bird as he "Snaps the returning bee with all her sweets." And delighted we follow on as he leads us through his favorite haunts where the birds sing

"From the first dawn of dewy morning gray  
In sweet confusion till the close of day."

There is a lack of imagination in "The Invitation" and an overbalancing of adjective with adjective; in short it has the faults of the school from which Wilson learned his measures. The locusts rise in "*countless millions*" to our "*wondering eyes*." "The *richest* harvests choke each *loaded* field"; one tires of this careful adjusting of the scales, the even swing of the metre grows monotonous, but the fault is in the taste of the age rather than in the poet, and did we condemn a writer for this, Pope and Goldsmith would be as gross sinners as Wilson. The beauty of the poem redeems it. True to nature, a just picture, rather than an idealized impression, it stands out in pleasing relief against the tediously pretentious epics of the day, such as Barlow's "Columbiad," or monotonous panegyrics of the order of Humphrey's "Happiness of America." It is not a great poem, certainly, but it is full of beauty and interest, and, when considered historically in view of what was being produced in America at that period, it has its own importance.

"A Rural Walk" is another descriptive nature poem of slightly greater length than "The Invitation." It is written in four-stressed iambic quatrains with alternate rhyme instead of the successive pentameters of the other poem. Though it has some of the fresh beauty of the other piece yet it is far less striking in the richness of the pictures drawn and in the aptness of poetical ex-

pression. The poem is partly addressed to William Bartram, the delightful old botanist of Philadelphia, and it contains a pleasant note of acknowledgment to him. Though perhaps the least important of this late group of nature poems, yet "A Rural Walk" has caught enough of the spirit of nature to give it a fresh beauty, and there is a sense of sweet melody which it leaves with you as though, to quote its repeated line, one had indeed been where "thrushes pipe their evening song."

In "The Solitary Tutor," which appeared in the October *Literary Magazine* two months later than the "Rural Walk," Wilson produced what is perhaps from an artistic point of view the best of his longer English poems. In this Wilson evidently set himself a definite model, Shenstone's "Schoolmistress," adopting therefor the Spenserian stanza. The poem is autobiographical and depicts very vividly the scenes of Gray's Ferry; Wilson himself is the "Solitary Tutor." In Shenstone's poem there is a very real character drawn, and some vivid touches of portraiture distinguish it. The sketch of the good old lady and her hen is most felicitous, and very human indeed is the picture of the schoolmistress when a culprit stands before her, and

"brandishing the rod she doth begin  
To loose the brogues, the stripling's late delight,  
And down they drop, appears his dainty skin,  
Fair as the furry coat of whitest ermlin."

Wilson is more subjective and does not succeed so well in producing a character, but the poetical beauties of his poem compare quite favorably

with the stanzas of "The Schoolmistress" and exceed by far those of the contemporary American poet Dwight, written in the same metre, in his "Indian Temple."

The poem has a less imaginative beauty than the "Invitation," and never rises to poetic fervor, but it flows on in a pleasingly musical measure,—slightly monotonous perhaps,—with many rich nature-pictures and much interesting local color.

The only poems that are now left to be considered are "The Blue-bird," "The Osprey," and "The King-bird," three charming poems which were printed in the "American Ornithology." "The King-bird or Tyrant Fly-Catcher" is the longest of these, being more in the descriptive vein, and is written in rhyming pentameters. The other two are far superior to it as poems. Here at last we have the best expression of Wilson's poetic art. In both of these poems there is an original note that we find to the same extent in nothing else that he wrote except the Scotch "Watty and Meg." "The Fisherman's Hymn" in "The Osprey" has a merry swinging measure that excellently fits its subject. It is marred by the enumeration of the various fishes in the second stanza, but it is one of the best of our early American poems.

"The American Blue-bird," however, is even better in its rhythmical melody and genuine embodiment of the spirit of nature. He was inspired to sing by this very love of nature. In his "Forsters" he exclaimed,

"What though profuse in many a patriot's praise  
 We boast a Barlow's soul—exalting lays;  
 An Humphreys, blessed with Homer's nervous glow,  
 And Freedom's friend and champion in Freneau;  
 Yet Nature's charms that bloom so lovely here,  
 Unhailed arrive, unheeded disappear."

These were the bards that now fired his emulation and this the theme which should inspire his pen. It is in this historical setting that we must consider Wilson before we conjecture his place in American literature.

Joel Barlow, David Humphreys, Timothy Dwight, John Trumbull, and Philip Freneau were the poets whose works were best known among the native writers. The first three were authors of long, pretentious, but hopelessly dreary works, with no distinctive style to mark one from the other. Their verses were counterparts of the pompous lines of Wilson's own "Foresters," and like that piece are best remembered only historically. Trumbull really produced a verse full of a rough, ready wit, but he was certainly no poet. Freneau was the one poet of this group, and wrote a few nature poems of simple, real beauty.

There were some little lyrics being produced of unusual beauty by John Shaw, Richard Dana, and Richard Wilde, but they were exceedingly few in number. Wilson in his nature poems most resembled Dana and Freneau, and "The Bluebird" and "The Osprey" may justly claim a place with Freneau's "Wild Honeysuckle" and "To a Honey Bee," and Dana's "Little Beach-bird": delicate little poems all of them, that were to be forerunners of the nature poems of Whittier and

Bryant and our later poets. These early singers were the beginnings of an American school of poetry, and so, historically, their names are very significant. Among them Wilson must have a place. In volume he left enough to show the seriousness with which he considered himself as a writer of verse, but the volume of his poetical work does not help his reputation. In the full edition edited in 1876 by Alexander B. Grosart the few good poems which Wilson produced are lost in the great mass of rubbish which the editor has gathered together from the author's youthful past. Part of it is made up of puerile attempts at verse; part, of mere doggerel written offhand at some odd moments to enclose in letters to his friends. Some of the pieces, produced under the influence of the old chap-books, are positively revolting in their vulgar coarseness and utter lack of motif. Thrown promiscuously together they seem a hopeless collection of worthless verse which it were best to leave to grow dusty on forgotten shelves.

When the chaff is winnowed out, however, something is still left of real worth and enough of it to make a respectable-sized volume. Such a collection would include about twenty poems. Among these would certainly be "The American Blue-bird," "The Osprey," "The Invitation," "The Solitary Tutor," "A Hymn" (IV in the series of hymns), "Watty and Meg," "Eppie and the Deil," "The Disconsolate Wren," "Epistle to William Mitchell," and "The Laurel Disputed."

Others that would perhaps be included are

"The King-bird," "A Rural Walk," the two poems on Burns, the group, "Epistles" to Andrew Clark, David Brodie, and Eben Picken, and selections from "The Foresters." These would include among them the best of Wilson's work in verse; the first eight are undeniably good.

In his poetry Wilson was not remarkable for his originality, and it was only his intense love for the birds that sometimes made him so forget all models that he was able to produce something that had on it the true mark of his own personality. He lacked critical judgment and often his most excellent lines occur in otherwise barren poems, while just as frequently his strongest stanzas are marred by strikingly poor lines. He was too reserved to ever put his innermost feelings into his verse, and his taciturn Scotch nature rarely granted to him a moment of heated fervor. Yet his ardent love for nature and the close observation which he made of her ways, combined with his poetic sensibilities, enabled him to write some exceedingly attractive nature poems which should assure him consideration among our early lesser poets. His pictures of nature are eminently true and his verse is usually rhythmical, while sometimes his lines are exquisitely musical.

When we come to count over American poets, we shall find many greater and more splendid names, but America can never be so rich in poetry that we should forget the early beginnings of our song, or altogether overlook the modest verses of Alexander Wilson, "the poet-naturalist," in whose heart the birds "nestled and sang."

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## **SELECTED POEMS**



## THE AMERICAN BLUE-BIRD

When Winter's cold tempests and snows are no more,  
Green meadows, and brown furrow'd fields reappearing,

The fishermen hauling their shad to the shore,  
And cloud-cleaving geese to the lakes are a-steering;

When first the lone butterfly flits on the wing,  
When red glow the maples, so fresh and so pleasin';  
O then comes the blue-bird, the herald of spring,  
And hails with his warblings the charms of the season.

Then loud piping frogs make the marshes to ring;  
Then warm glows the sunshine, and fine is the weather;

The blue woodland flowers just beginning to spring,  
And spicewood and sassafras budding together;

O then to your gardens, ye housewives, repair!  
Your walks border up; sow and plant at your leisure;

The blue-bird will chant from his box such an air,  
That all your hard toils will seem truly a pleasure.

He flits thro' the orchard, he visits each tree,  
The red flowering peach, and the apple's sweet blossoms;

He snaps up destroyers wherever they be,  
And seizes the catiffs that lurk in their bosoms;

He drags the vile grub from the corn it devours,  
The worms from their webs where they riot and welter;

His song and his services freely are ours,  
And all that he asks, is, in summer a shelter.

The ploughman is pleased when he gleans in his train,  
 Now searching the furrows, now mounting to cheer  
 him;

The gard'ner delights in his sweet simple strain,  
 And leans on his spade to survey and to hear him;  
 The slow-ling'ring schoolboys forget they'll be chid,  
 While gazing intent as he warbles before 'em,  
 In mantle of sky-bue, and bosom so red,  
 That each little loiterer seems to adore him.

When all the gay scenes of the summer are o'er,  
 And autumn slow enters so silent and fallow,  
 And millions of warblers, that charm'd us before,  
 Have fled in the train of the sun-seeking swallow,  
 The blue-bird, forsaken, yet true to his home,  
 Still lingers, and looks for a milder to-morrow;  
 Till forc'd by the horrors of winter to roam,  
 He sings his adieu in a lone note of sorrow.

While Spring's lovely season, serene, dewy, warm,  
 The green face of earth and the pure blue of heaven,  
 Or Love's native music, have influence to charm,  
 Or Sympathy's glow to our feelings are given—  
 Still dear to each bosom the blue-bird shall be;  
 His voice, like the thrilling of hope, is a treasure;  
 For, thro' bleakest storms, if a calm he but see,  
 He comes to remind us of sunshine and pleasure.

## THE OSPREY

Soon as the sun, great ruler of the year,  
Bends to our northern clime his bright career,  
And from the caves of ocean calls from sleep  
The finny shoals and myriads of the deep;  
When freezing tempests back to Greenland ride,  
And day and night the equal hours divide;  
True to the season, o'er our sea-beat shore,  
The sailing osprey high is seen to soar,  
With broad unmoving wing, and circling slow  
Marks each loose straggler in the deep below;  
Sweeps down like lightning! plunges with a roar!  
And bears his struggling victim to the shore.  
The long-housed fisherman beholds with joy,  
The well known signals of his rough employ;  
And as he bears his nets and oars along,  
Thus hails the welcome season with a song:

## THE FISHERMAN'S HYMN

The osprey sails above the Sound,  
The geese are gone, the gulls are flying;  
The herring shoals swarm thick around,  
The nets are launched, the boats are plying.  
Yo ho, my hearts! let's seek the deep,  
Raise high the song and cheerly wish her;  
Still as the bending net we sweep,  
"God bless the fish-hawk and the fisher."

She brings us fish—she brings us spring,  
Good times, fair weather, warmth and plenty;  
Fine store of shad, trout, herring, ling,  
Sheeps-head and drum, and old wives dainty.



Yo ho, my hearts! let's seek the deep,  
 Ply every oar, and cheerly wish her,  
 Still as the bending net we sweep,  
 "God bless the fish-hawk and the fisher!"

She rears her young on yonder tree,  
 She leaves her faithful mate to mind 'em;  
 Like us, for fish she sails the sea,  
 And, plunging, shows us where to find 'em.  
 Yo ho, my hearts! let's seek the deep,  
 Ply every oar, and cheerly wish her,  
 While slow the bending net we sweep,  
 "God bless the fish-hawk and the fisher!"

## THE INVITATION.

ADDRESSED TO MR. CHARLES ORR

How blest is he who crowns in shades like these  
A youth of labour with an age of ease;  
Who quits a world where strong temptations try,  
And since he cannot conquer, learns to fly.—*Goldsmith.*

From Schuylkill's rural banks o'erlooking wide  
The glitt'ring pomp of Philadelphia's pride,  
From laurel groves that bloom forever here,  
I hail my dearest friend with heart sincere,  
And fondly ask, nay ardently implore,  
One kind excursion to my cot once more.

The fairest scenes that ever blest the year  
Now o'er our vales and yellow plains appear;  
The richest harvest choke each loaded field,  
The ruddiest fruit our glowing orchards yield.  
In green, and gold, and purple plumes array'd,  
The gayest songsters chant in ev'ry shade.

O could the muse but faithfully portray  
The various pipes that hymn our rising day,  
Whose thrilling melody can banish care,  
Cheer the lone heart, and almost soothe despair,  
My grateful verse should with their praises glow,  
And distant shores our charming warblers know;  
And you, dear sir, their harmony to hear,  
Would bless the strain that led your footsteps here.

When morning dawns, and the bright sun again  
 Leaves the flat forests of the Jersey main,  
 Then through our woodbines, wet with glitt'ring dews,  
 The flow'r-fed humming-bird his round pursues,  
 Sips with inserted tube the honey'd blooms,  
 And chirps his gratitude, as round he roams;  
 While richest roses, though in crimson drest,  
 Shrink from the splendor of his gorgeous breast.  
 What heav'nly tints in mingling radiance fly!  
 Each rapid movement gives a diff'rent dye;  
 Like scales of burnish'd gold they dazzling show;  
 Now sink to shade, now furnace-bright they glow.

High on the waving top of some tall tree,  
 Sweet sings the thrush to morning and to me;  
 While round its skirts, 'midst pendent boughs of green,  
 The orange Baltimore is busy seen.  
 Prone from the points his netted nest is hung,  
 With hempen cordage curiously strung;  
 Here his young nestlings safe from danger lie,  
 Their craving wants the teeming boughs supply.  
 Gay chants their guardian, as for food he goes,  
 And waving breezes rock them to repose.  
 The white-wing'd woodpecker with crimson crest,  
 Who digs from solid trunks his curious nest,  
 Sees the long black snake stealing to his brood,  
 And, screaming, stains the branches with its blood.

Here o'er the woods the tyrant king-bird sails,  
 Spreads his long wings, and every foe assails,  
 Snaps the returning bee with all her sweets,  
 Pursues the crow, the diving hawk defeats,  
 Darts on the eagle downwards from afar,  
 And 'midst the clouds prolongs the whirling war.

Deep in the thickest shade, with cadence sweet,  
Soft as the tones that heaven-bound pilgrims greet,  
Sings the wood-robin close retir'd from sight,  
And swells his solo 'mid the shades of night.  
Here sports the mocking-bird with matchless strain,  
Returning back each warbler's notes again:  
Now chants a robin, now o'er all the throng,  
Pours out in strains sublime the thrush's song,  
Barks like the squirrel, like the cat-bird squalls,  
Now "Whip-poor-will," and now "Bob White" he  
calls.

The lonely red-bird too adorns the scene,  
In brightest scarlet through the foliage green,  
With many a warbler more, a vocal throng,  
That shelter'd here their joyous notes prolong,  
From the first dawn of dewy morning grey,  
In sweet confusion till the close of day.  
Ev'n when still night descends serene and cool,  
Ten thousand pipes awake from yonder pool;  
Owls, crickets, tree-frogs, katydids resound,  
And flashing fire-flies sparkle all around,  
Such boundless plenty, such abundant stores  
The rosy hand of nature round us pours,  
That every living tribe their powers employ,  
From morn to eve, to testify their joy,  
And pour from meadow, field, and boughs above,  
One general song of gratitude and love.  
Even now, emerging from their prisons deep,  
Wak'd from their seventeen years of tedious sleep,  
In countless millions to our wondering eyes  
The long-remembered locusts glad arise,  
Burst their enclosing shells, at Nature's call,  
And join in praise to the great God of all.

Come then, dear sir, the noisy town forsake,  
 With me awhile these rural joys partake;  
 Come, leave your books, your pens, your studious  
       cares,

Come, see the bliss that God for man prepares.  
 My shelt'ring bow'rs, with honeysuckles white,  
 My fishy pools, my cataracts invite;  
 My vines for you their clusters thick suspend,  
 My juicy peaches swell but for my friend;  
 For him who joins, with elegance and art,  
 The brightest talents to the warmest heart.  
 Here as with me at morn you range the wood,  
 Or headlong plunge amid the crystal flood,  
 More vig'rous life your firmer nerves shall brace,  
 A ruddier glow shall wanton o'er your face,  
 A livelier glance re-animate your eye.  
 Each anxious thought, each fretting care shall fly,  
 For here, through every field and rustling grove,  
 Sweet Peace and rosy Health for ever rove.

Come, then, O come! your burning streets forego,  
 Your lanes and wharves, where winds infectious blow,  
 Where sweeps and oystermen eternal growl,  
 Carts, crowds, and coaches harrow up the soul,  
 For deep, majestic woods, and op'ning glades,  
 And shining pools, and awe-inspiring shades;  
 Where fragrant shrubs perfume the air around,  
 And bending orchards kiss the flow'ry ground,  
 And luscious berries spread a feast for Jove,  
 And golden cherries stud the boughs above;  
 Amid these various sweets thy rustic friend  
 Shall to each woodland haunt thy steps attend,  
 His solitary walks, his noontide bowers,  
 The old associates of his lonely hours;  
 While Friendship's converse, gen'rous and sincere,  
 Exchanging every joy and every tear,  
 Shall warm each heart with such an ardent glow,  
 As wealth's whole pageantry could ne'er bestow.

Perhaps (for who can nature's ties forget?)  
As underneath the flowery shade we sit,  
In this rich western world remotely plac'd,  
Our thoughts may roam beyond the wat'ry waste;  
And see, with sadden'd hearts, in memory's eye,  
Those native shores, where dear-lov'd kindred sigh:  
Where War and ghastly Want in horror reign,  
And dying babes to fainting sires complain.  
While we, alas! these mournful scenes retrace,  
In climes of plenty, liberty, and peace,  
Our tears shall flow, our ardent pray'rs arise,  
That Heaven would wipe all sorrow from their eyes.  
Thus, in celestial climes, the heavenly train,  
Escap'd from earth's dark ills, and all its pain  
Sigh o'er the scenes of suffering man below,  
And drop a tear in tribute to our woe.

## THE SOLITARY TUTOR.

Who'er across the Schuylkill's winding tide,  
Beyond Gray's Ferry half a mile, has been,  
Down in a bridge-built hollow must have spy'd  
A neat stone school-house on a sloping green:  
There tufted cedars scatter'd round are seen,  
And stripling poplars planted in a row;  
Some old gray white-oaks overhang the scene,  
Pleas'd to look upon the youths below,  
Whose noisy noontide sports no care or sorrow know.

On this hand rise the woods in deep'ning shade,  
Resounding with the songs of warblers sweet,  
And there a waving sign-board hangs display'd  
From mansion fair, the thirsty soul's retreat;  
There way-worn pilgrims rest their weary feet,  
When noontide heats or evening shades prevail:  
The widow's fare, still plentiful and neat,  
Can nicest guest deliciously regale,  
And make his heart rejoice the *sorrel horse* to hail.

Adjoining this, old Vulcan's shop is seen,  
Where winds, and fires, and thumping hammers roar,  
White-wash'd without, but black enough within \* \* \*  
Emblem of modern patriots many a score.  
The restive steed impatient at the door,  
Starts at this thundering voice and brawny arm,  
While yellow Jem with horse-tail fans him o'er,  
Driving aloof the ever buzzing swarm,  
Whose shrill blood-sucking pipes his restless fears  
alarm.

An ever-varying scene the road displays,  
With horsemen, thundering stage, and stately team,  
Now burning with the sun's resplendent rays,  
Now lost in clouds of dust the travellers seen,  
And now a lengthen'd pond or miry stream.  
Deep sink the wheels, and slow they drag along,  
Journeying to town, with butter, apples, cream,  
Fowls, eggs, and fruit, in many a motley throng,  
Coop'd in their little carts their various truck among.

And yonder, nestled in enclust'ring trees,  
Where many a rose-bush round the green yard glows,  
Wall'd from the road, with seats for shade and ease,  
A yellow-fronted cottage sweetly shows:  
The towering poplars rise in spiry rows,  
And green catalpas, white with branchy flowers;  
Her matron arms a weeping willow throws  
Wide o'er the dark green grass, and pensive lours,  
Midst plum-trees, pillar'd hops, and honey-suckle bow-  
ers.

Here dwells the guardian of these younglings gay,  
A strange recluse and solitary wight,  
In Britain's isle, on Scottish mountains gray,  
His infant eyes first open'd to the light.  
His parents saw with partial fond delight  
Unfolding genius crown their fostering care,  
And talk'd with tears of that enrapturing sight,  
When, clad in sable gown, with solemn air,  
The walls of God's own house should echo back his  
pray'r.

Dear smiling Hope! to thy enchanting hand,  
What cheering joys, what ecstasies we owe!  
Touch'd by the magic of thy fairy wand,  
Before us spread, what heavenly prospects glow!



Thro' Life's rough thorny wild we lab'ring go,  
 And tho' a thousand disappointments grieve,  
 Ev'n from the grave's dark verge we forward throw  
 Our straining, wishful eyes on those we leave,  
 And with their future fame our sinking hearts relieve.

But soon, too soon, these fond illusions fled!  
 In vain they pointed out that pious height;  
 By Nature's strong resistless impulse led,  
 These dull dry doctrines ever would he slight.  
 Wild Fancy form'd him for fantastic flight;  
 He lov'd the steep's high summit to explore,  
 To watch the splendor of the orient bright,  
 The dark deep forest, and the sea-beat shore,  
 Where thro' resounding rocks the liquid mountains  
                   roar.

When gath'ring clouds the vaults of Heav'n o'er-  
                   spread,  
 And op'ning streams of livid lightning flew,  
 From some o'erhanging cliff the uproar dread,  
 Transfix'd rapt'rous wonder, he would view.  
 When the red torrent big and bigger grew,  
 Or deep'ning snows for days obscur'd the air,  
 Still with the storm his transports would renew.  
 Roar, pour away! was still his eager pray'r,  
 While shiv'ring swains around were sinking in de-  
                   spair.

That worldly gift which misers *merit* call,  
 But wise men *cunning* and the art of trade,  
 That scheming foresight how to scrape up all,  
 How pence may *groats*, and shillings *pounds* be made,  
 As little knew he as the moorland maid  
 Who ne'er beheld a cottage but her own:

Sour Parsimony's words he seldom weigh'd,  
His heart's warm impulse was the guide alone,  
When suffering friendship sigh'd, or weeping wretch  
did moan.

Dear, dear to him Affection's ardent glow,  
Alas! from all he lov'd for ever torn,  
E'en now, as Memory's sad reflections flow,  
Deep grief o'erwhelms him and he weeps forlorn;  
By hopeless thought, by wasting sorrow worn,  
Around on Nature's scenes he turns his eye,  
Charm'd with her peaceful eve, her fragrant morn,  
Her green magnificence, her gloomiest sky,  
That fill th' exulting soul with admiration high.

One charming nymph with transport he adores,  
Fair Science, crown'd with many a figur'd sign;  
Her smiles, her sweet society implores,  
And mixes jocund with th' encircling nine;  
While Mathematics solves his dark design,  
Sweet Music soothes him with her syren strains,  
Seraphic Poetry with warmth divine,  
Exalts him far above celestial plains,  
And Painting's fairy hand his mimic pencil trains.

Adown each side of his sequester'd cot,  
Two bubbling streamlets wind their rocky way,  
And mingling as they leave this rural spot,  
Down thro' a woody vale meandering stray,  
Round many a moss-grown rock they dimpling play,  
Where laurel thickets clothe the steeps around,  
And oaks thick, towering quite shut out the day,  
And spread a venerable gloom profound,  
Made still more sweetly solemn by the riv'let's sound.

Where down smooth glistening rocks it rambling  
     pours,  
 Till in a pool its silent waters sleep,  
 A dark brown cliff o'ertopped with fern and flowers,  
 Hangs grimly frowning o'er the glassy deep;  
 Above thro' ev'ry chink the woodbines creep,  
 And smooth bark beeches spread their arms around.  
 Whose roots cling twisted round the rocky steep:  
 A more sequester'd scene is no where found,  
 For contemplation deep and silent thought profound.

Here many a tour the lonely tutor takes,  
 Long known to Solitude, his partner dear,  
 For rustling woods his empty school forsakes,  
 At morn, still noon, and silent evening clear.  
 Wild Nature's scenes amuse his wand'rings here;  
 The old gray rocks that overhang the stream,  
 The nodding flow'rs that on their peaks appear,  
 Plants, birds, and insects are a feast to him,  
 Howe'er obscure, deform'd, minute, or huge they seem.

Sweet rural scenes! unknown to poet's song,  
 Where Nature's charm in rich profusion lie,  
 Birds, fruits, and flowers, an ever pleasing throng,  
 Deny'd to Britain's bleak and northern sky.  
 Here Freedom smiles serene with dauntless eye,  
 And leads the exil'd stranger thro' her groves,  
 Assists to sweep the forest from on high,  
 And gives to man the fruitful field he loves,  
 Where proud imperious lord or tyrant never roves.

In these green solitudes one fav'rite spot  
 Still draws his slow meanderings that way,  
 A mossy cliff beside a little grot,  
 Where two clear springs burst out upon the day.  
 There overhead the beechen branches play,

And from the rock the clustered columbine,  
While deep below the brook is seen to stray,  
O'erhung with alders, briar, and mantling vine,  
While on th' adjacent banks the glossy laurels shine.

Here Milton's heavenly themes delight his soul,  
Or Goldsmith's simple heart-bewitching lays;  
Now drives with Cook around the frozen pole,  
Or follows Bruce with marvel and amaze:  
Perhaps Rome's splendour sadly he surveys,  
Or Britain's scenes of cruelty and kings;  
Thro' Georgia's groves with gentle Bartram strays,  
Or mounts with Newton on archangels' wings,  
With manly Smollet laughs, with jovial Dibdin sings.

The air serene, and breathing odours sweet,  
The sound of falling streams, and humming bees,  
Wild choirs of songsters round his rural seat,  
To souls like his have ev'ry pow'r to please.  
The shades of night with rising sigh he sees  
Obscure the stream and leafy scenes around,  
And homeward wending thro' the moon-lit trees,  
The owl salutes him with her trem'lous sound,  
And many a flutt'ring bat pursues its mazy round.

Thus peaceful pass his lonely hours away;  
Thus, in retirement from his school affairs,  
He tastes a bliss unknown to worldings gay,  
A soothing antidote for all his cares.  
Adoring Nature's God, he joyous shares  
With happy millions Freedom's fairest scene,  
His ev'ning hymn some plaintive Scottish airs,  
Breath'd from the flute or melting violin,  
With life-inspiring reels and wanton jigs between.

## WATTY AND MEG

### A TALE

"We dream in courtship, but in wedlock wake."—*Pope*.

Keen the frosty winds were blawing,  
Deep the snaw had wreath'd the ploughs;  
Watty, weary'd a' day sawing,  
Daunert<sup>1</sup> down to Mungo Blue's.

Dryster Jock was sitting cracky,<sup>2</sup>  
Wi' Pate Tamson o' the Hill;  
"Come awa'," quo' Johnny, "Watty!  
Haith we'se hae anither gill."

Watty, glad to see Jock Jabos,  
And sae mony neibours roun',  
Kicket frae his shoon the snawbas,  
Syne ayont<sup>3</sup> the fire sat down.

Owre a broad wi' bannocks heapet,  
Cheese, and stoups, and glasses stood;  
Some were roaring, ithers sleepit,  
Ithers quietly chewt their cude.<sup>4</sup>

Jock was selling Pate some tallow,  
A' the rest a racket hel',  
A' but Watty, wha, poor fallow!  
Sat and smoket by himsel'.

Mungo fill'd him up a toothfu',  
Drank his health and Meg's in ane;  
Watty, puffing out a mouthfu',  
Pledged him wi' a dreary grane.

---

<sup>1</sup> Strolled.

<sup>2</sup> "Jokey."

<sup>3</sup> Then before.

<sup>4</sup> Chewed their cud.

"What's the matter, Watty, wi' you?  
 Trouth your chafts<sup>6</sup> are fa'ing in!  
 Something's wrang—I'm vex'd to see you—  
 Gudesake! but ye're desp'rate thin!"

"Ay," quo' Watty, "things are alter'd,  
 But it's past redemption now;  
 Lord! I wish I had been halter'd  
 When I marry'd Maggy Howe!

"I've been poor, and vex'd, and raggy,  
 Try'd wi' troubles no that sma';  
 Them I bore—but marrying Maggy  
 Laid the cap-stane o' them a'.

"Night and day she's ever yelping,  
 With the weans<sup>8</sup> she ne'er can gree;  
 When she's tired with perfect skelping,<sup>7</sup>  
 Then she flees like fire on me.

"See ye, Mungo! when she'll clash on<sup>8</sup>  
 With her everlasting clack,<sup>9</sup>  
 Whiles I've had my neve,<sup>10</sup> in passion,  
 Lifted up to break her back."

"O, for Gudesake, keep frae cuffets!"  
 Mungo shook his head and said:  
 "Weel I ken what sort of life it's;  
 Ken ye, Watty, how I did?—

"After Bess and I were kippled,  
 Soon she grew like ony bear;  
 Bark my shins, and, when I tippedled,  
 Harl't out my very hair!

---

<sup>6</sup> Cheeks.

<sup>8</sup> Children.

<sup>7</sup> Whipping.

<sup>9</sup> Chatter.

<sup>9</sup> Din.

<sup>10</sup> Clenched fist.

"For a wee I quietly knuckled,  
 But when naething would prevail,  
 Up my claes and cash I buckled,  
 Bess, for ever fare-ye-weel—

"Then her din grew less and less aye,  
 Haith I gart her change her tune;  
 Now a better wife than Bessy  
 Never stept in leather shoon.

"Try this, Watty—When ye see her  
 Raging like a roaring flood,  
 Swear that moment that ye'll lea' her;  
 'That's the way to keep her good."

Laughing, sangs, and lasses' skirls,<sup>11</sup>  
 Echo'd now out-thro' the roof;  
 "Done!" quo' Pate, and syne his erls<sup>12</sup>  
 Nail'd the Dryster's wauked loof.<sup>13</sup>

In the thrang of stories telling,  
 Shaking hauns, and ither cheer;  
 Swith! a chap comes on the hallan,<sup>14</sup>  
 "Mungo, is our Watty here?"

Maggy's well kent tongue and hurry,  
 Darted thro' him like a knife;  
 Up the door flew—like a Fury  
 In came Watty's scawling wife.

"Nasty, gude-for-naething being!  
 O ye snuffy, drucken sow!  
 Bringing wife and weans to ruin,  
 Drinking here wi' sic a crew!

---

<sup>11</sup> Peals of laughter.

<sup>12</sup> Pledge money.

<sup>13</sup> Hardened palm.

<sup>14</sup> Outside-door.

"Devil, nor your legs were broken!  
 Sic a life nae flesh endures;  
 Toiling like a slave to sloken  
 You, you dyvor,<sup>15</sup> and your 'hores!

"Rise, ye drunken beast o' Bethel!  
 Drink's your night and day's desire;  
 Rise, this precious hour! or faith, I'll  
 Fling your whiskey i' the fire!"

Watty heard her tongue unhallow'd,  
 Pay'd his groat wi' little din;  
 Left the house, while Maggy fallow'd,  
 Flytin'<sup>16</sup> a' the road behin'.

Fowk frae every door came lamping;<sup>17</sup>  
 Maggy curst them ane and a';  
 Clappet wi' her hands, and stamping,  
 Lost her bauchles<sup>18</sup> i' the sna'.

Hame, at length she turn'd the gavel,  
 Wi' a face as white's a clout;<sup>19</sup>  
 Raging like a very devil,  
 Kicking stools and chairs about.

"Ye'll sit wi' your limmers round you!  
 Hang you, sir? I'll be your death!  
 Little hauds<sup>20</sup> my hands, confound you,  
 But I cleave you to the teeth!"

Watty, wha' midst this oration,  
 Ey'd her whiles, but durstna speak,  
 Sat like patient Resignation,  
 Trem'ling by the ingle cheek.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Drunkard.<sup>16</sup> Scolding.<sup>17</sup> Striding.<sup>18</sup> Slippers.<sup>19</sup> Cloth.<sup>20</sup> Holds.<sup>21</sup> Fireside.



Sad his wee drap brose he sippet,  
 Maggy's tongue gaed like a bell;  
 Quietly to his bed he slippet,  
 Sighing aften to himsel':

"Nane are free frae some vexation,  
 Ilk ane has his ills to dree;<sup>22</sup>  
 But thro' a' the hale creation  
 Is a mortal vexed like me!"

A' night lang he rowt and gaunted,  
 Sleep or rest he cou'dna tak;  
 Maggy, aft wi' horror haunted,  
 Mum'ling, started at his back.

Soon as e'er the morning peepit,  
 Up raise Watty, waefu' chiel;<sup>23</sup>  
 Kist his weanies, while they sleepit,  
 Wauken'd Meg, and sought fareweel.

"Farewell, Meg!—and, O, may Heaven  
 Keep you aye within His care;  
 Watty's heart ye've lang been grievin',  
 Now he'll never fash<sup>24</sup> you mair.

"Happy cou'd I been beside you,  
 Happy, baith at morn and e'en;  
 A' the ills that e'er betide you,  
 Watty aye turn'd out your frien';

"But ye ever like to see me  
 Vext and sighing, late and air;  
 Farewell, Meg! I've sworn to lea' thee,  
 So thou'll never see me mair."

---

<sup>22</sup> Endure.

<sup>23</sup> Fellow.

<sup>24</sup> Disturb.

Meg, a' sabbin sae to lose him,  
 Sic a change had never wist;  
 Held his hand close to her bosom,  
 While her heart was like to burst.

"O, my Watty, will ye lea' me,  
 Frien'less, helpless, to despair?  
 O! for this ae time forgi'e me:  
 Never will I vex ye mair."

"Ay! ye've aft said that, and broken  
 A' your vows ten times a week;  
 No, no, Meg! See, there's a token  
 Glittering on my bonnet cheek.

"Owre the seas I march this morning,  
 Listed, tested, sworn and a';  
 Forced by your confounded girning—  
 Farewell, Meg! for I'm awa'."

Then poor Maggy's tears and clamour  
 Gush afresh and louder grew;  
 While the weans, wi' mournfu' yaumour,<sup>28</sup>  
 Round their sabbing mother flew.

"Thro' the yirth<sup>28</sup> I'll waunner wi' you—  
 Stay, O Watty! stay at hame;  
 Here upo' my knees I'll gi'e you  
 Ony vow ye like to name;

"See your poor young lamies pleadin',  
 Will ye gang and break our heart?  
 No a house to put our head in!  
 No a friend to take our part!"

<sup>28</sup> Uproar.<sup>28</sup> Earth.

Ilka word came like a bullet,  
 Watty's heart begoud to shake;  
 On a kist<sup>27</sup> he laid his wallet,  
 Dighted<sup>28</sup> baith his een and spake,—

"If ance mair I cou'd, by writing,  
 Lea' the sogers, and stay still;  
 Wad you swear to drop your flyting?"  
 "Yes, O Watty! yes, I will."

"Then," quo Watty, "mind, be honest;  
 Aye to keep your temper strive;  
 Gin you break this dreadfu' promise,  
 Never mair expect to thrive;

"Marget Howe! this hour ye solemn  
 Swear by everything that's gude,  
 Ne'er again your spouse to scal'<sup>29</sup> him,  
 While life warms your heart and blood;

"That you'll ne'er in Mungo's seek me;  
 Ne'er put drucken to my name:  
 Never out at e'ening steek<sup>30</sup> me;  
 Never gloom when I come hame;

"That ye'll ne'er like Bessy Miller,  
 Kick my shins, or rug<sup>31</sup> my hair;  
 Lastly, I'm to keep the siller;<sup>32</sup>  
 This upon your saul you swear?"

"O-h!" quo' Meg; "Awell," quo' Watty,  
 Farewell! faith, I'll try the seas;"  
 "O stand still," quo' Meg, and grat<sup>33</sup> aye;  
 "Ony, ony way ye please."

---

<sup>27</sup> Chest.<sup>28</sup> Pull.<sup>29</sup> Wiped.<sup>30</sup> Silver.<sup>31</sup> Scold.<sup>32</sup> Cried.<sup>33</sup> Lock.

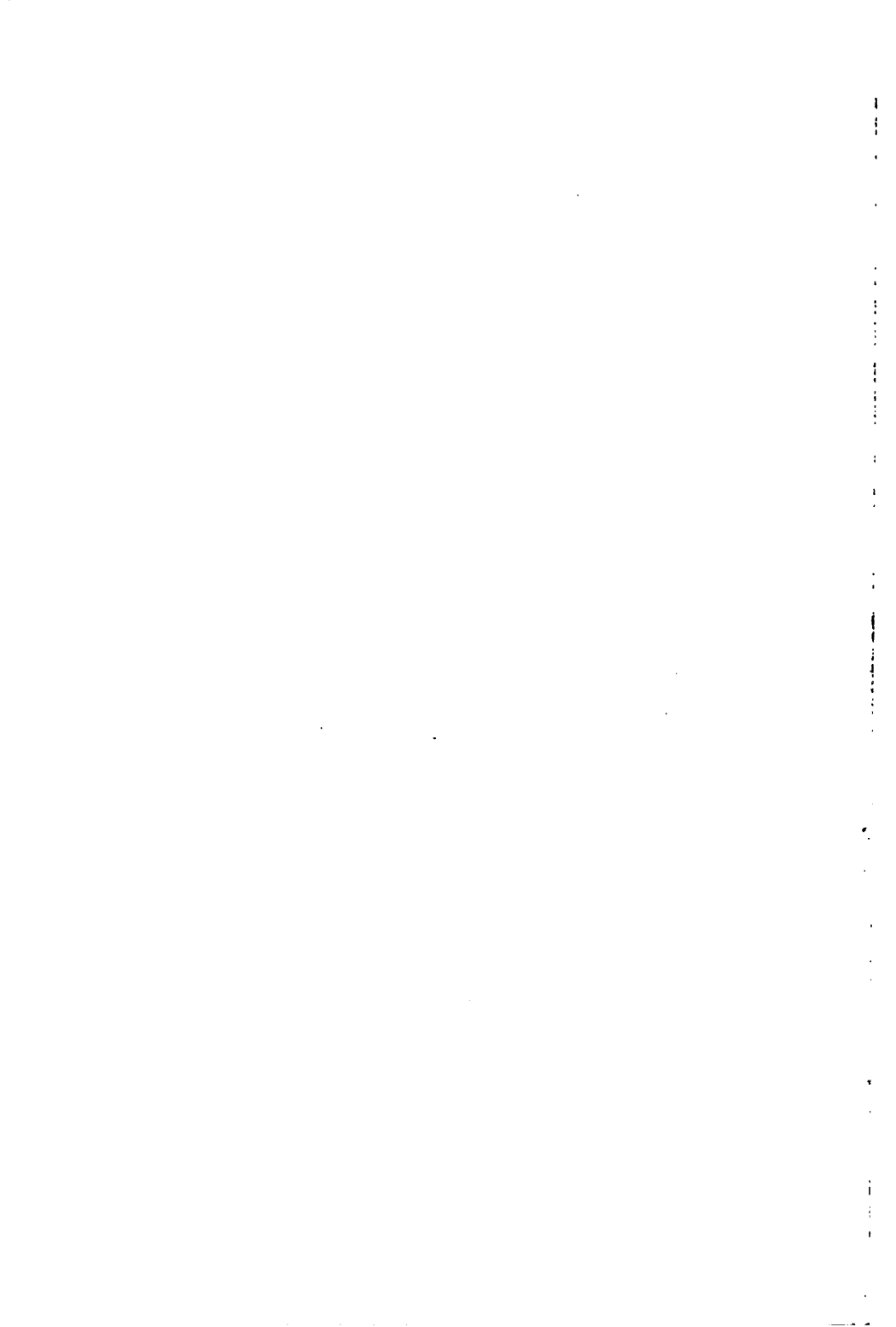
Maggy syne,<sup>84</sup> because he prest her,  
Swore to a' thing o'er again;  
Watty lap,<sup>85</sup> and danc'd, and kist her;  
Wow! but he was won'rous fain.

Down he threw his staff, victorious;  
Aff gaed bonnet, claes, and shoon;  
Syne below the blankets, glorious,  
Held anither Hinnymoon!

---

<sup>84</sup> Then.

<sup>85</sup> Leaped.





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